

2026–2027 TOWNSEND PRESS

Sunday School Commentary

Based on the International Lessons Series



one hundred sixth edition

106

KING JAMES VERSION | NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

2026–2027 TOWNSEND **PRESS**

Sunday School **Commentary**

Based on the International Lessons Series

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ISBN: 979-8-89959-704-6

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Fall 2024 WORSHIP: ALTARS, SONGS, AND SACRIFICES Worship in the Covenant Community Genesis; Exodus; 2 Samuel; 1 Kings; 2 Kings; 2 Chronicles; Isaiah; Psalms; John	Winter 2024–2025 GOD'S KINGDOM COME A King Forever and Ever Ruth; 2 Samuel; Psalms; Matthew; Luke	Spring 2025 WORSHIP: ALTARS, SONGS, AND SACRIFICES Costly Sacrifices Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers; Deuteronomy; 1 Chronicles; 2 Chronicles; Ezra; Matthew; Hebrews; 1 John; Revelation	Summer 2025 WORSHIP: ALTARS, SONGS, AND SACRIFICES Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings Genesis; Matthew; Luke John; Romans; 1 Corinthians; Ephesians; Hebrews; 1 Peter
Fall 2025 LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD Judah—from Isaiah to Exile 2 Kings; 2 Chronicles; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; John; Hebrews	Winter 2025–2026 LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD Enduring Beliefs of the Christian Faith Exodus; Deuteronomy; Joshua; Nehemiah; Psalms; Isaiah; Ezekiel; Joel; Jonah; Malachi; Matthew; Mark; Luke; John; Acts; Romans; 1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians; Ephesians; Colossians; 1 Thessalonians; 1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Hebrews; 2 Peter; 1 John; Revelation	Spring 2026 LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD Social Teachings of the Church Genesis; Exodus; Deuteronomy; Ruth; Nehemiah; Psalms; Isaiah; Daniel; Jonah; Zechariah; Matthew; Mark; Luke; John; Acts; Romans; 1 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; Hebrews; 1 Thessalonians; 2 Thessalonians; 1 Timothy; James; 1 Peter; Revelation	Summer 2026 LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses Judges; 1 Samuel; 2 Samuel; Amos; Matthew; Mark; Luke; John; Acts; Philippians; 2 Timothy
Fall 2026 WE HAVE A STORY TO TELL The Soul of a Nation Deuteronomy; Joshua; Judges; 1 and 2 Samuel; 1 Kings; Matthew; James; Hebrews	Winter 2026–2027 WE HAVE A STORY TO TELL Power to the People Leviticus; Matthew; 1, 2, and 3 John; 1 & 2 Peter; Jude	Spring 2027 WE HAVE A STORY TO TELL Written that You Might Believe Matthew; Mark; John	Summer 2027 WE HAVE A STORY TO TELL Just a Closer Walk Exodus; Isaiah; Acts; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; Philemon

LIST OF PRINTED TEXTS

The Printed Scriptural Texts used in the 2026–2027 *Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary* are arranged here in the order in which they appear in the Bible. Opposite each reference is the page number on which Scriptures appear in this edition of the *Commentary*.

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PREFACE

The *Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary*, based on the International Lessons Series, was developed consistent with the curriculum guidelines of the Committee on the Uniform Series, Education Leadership Ministries Commission, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Select Christian scholars and theologians—who themselves embrace the precepts, doctrines, and positions on biblical interpretation that we have come to believe—are contributors to this publication. With our participating in Scripture selection and the development of the matrices for the Guidelines for Lesson Development with the Committee on the Uniform Series, this presentation reflects the historic faith that we share within a rich heritage of worship and witness.

The format of the *Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary* lessons consists of the following: the Unit Title, the general subject with age-level topics, Printed Text from the King James Version and the New International Version of the Bible, Unifying Lesson Principle, Objectives of the Lesson, Points to Be Emphasized, The Historical Setting of the Lesson, The Geographical and Cultural Setting of the Lesson, Prominent Characters in the Lesson, Key Terms in the Lesson, Topical Outline of the Lesson—with the Biblical Background of the Lesson, Exposition and Application of the Scripture, and Concluding Reflection (designed to focus on the salient points of the lesson)—and the Home Daily Bible Readings. Each lesson concludes with a prayer.

The *Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary* is designed to be an instructional aid for persons involved in the ministry of Christian education. While the autonomy of the individual soul before God is affirmed, we believe that biblical truths find their highest expression within the community of believers whose corporate experiences serve as monitors to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith. As such, the Word of God must not only be understood, but it must also be embodied in the concrete realities of daily life. This serves to allow the Word of God to intersect in a meaningful way with those realities of life.

The presentation of the lessons anticipates the fact that some concepts and Scripture references do not lend themselves to meaningful comprehension by children. Hence, when this occurs, alternative passages of Scripture are used, along with appropriate content emphases, that are designed to assist children in their spiritual growth. There will, however, remain a consistent connection between the children, youth, and adult lessons through the Unifying Principle developed for each lesson.

We stand firm in our commitment to Christian growth, to the end that lives will be transformed through personal and group interaction with the Word of God. The challenge issued by the apostle Paul continues to find relevance for our faith journey: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, NRSV). May we all commit ourselves to the affirmation expressed by the psalmist: “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105, NIV).

KNOW YOUR WRITERS

Justin Michael Reed Fall Quarter



Justin Michael Reed is an associate professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He has earned a Bachelor's degree in African & African American Studies from Stanford, his Master's degree in Hebrew Bible from Harvard, and his PhD in Old Testament from Princeton Seminary. He combines these interests through teaching and publications focused on Black biblical hermeneutics, ideological criticism, and how the study of race and ethnicity can inform our interpretation of biblical texts. Reed's 2020 dissertation earned him the Manfred Lautenschlaeger Award for Theological Promise and is the foundation for his first monograph, *The Injustice of Noah's Curse* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

He is ordained as a Baptist minister and contributes to the wider church by sharing the insights of critical biblical scholarship in ways that are interesting and accessible. For access to some of his work, visit drjustinreed.com/ links. He is married to attorney Catherine Howard, who serves as a public defender for Jefferson County; they are the proud parents of Jordan and Justice.

Dr. Febbie Dickerson Winter Quarter



Dr. Febbie C. Dickerson is an independent New Testament scholar and clergy. She is the former Vice President of Academic Affairs at American Baptist College. She holds a B.A. in Journalism and Biblical Education from the University of Georgia and Beulah Heights University; and Master of Divinity and Master of Arts degrees and a Ph.D. in New Testament, all from Vanderbilt University. Her research interests focus on Luke–Acts, its depiction of women, the special Lukan material, and economic issues in the New Testament, such as labor, debt, poverty, and patronage.

Dr. Dickerson's scholarship has appeared in academic and theological publications with essays like "Empty Talk Masquerading as God Talk" in *Insights: Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, "Matriarch, Matriarchs" in the *Encyclopedia of Biblical Reception*, and "The Parable of the Persistent Widow: Does She Want Mercy, Justice, or Revenge?" in *The Bible Today*. She has also written the essays "Yehud, Persia, and Liberating Christological Exegesis in Light of the Book of Malachi" in *Testamentum Imperium* and "Acts 9:36–43: The Many Faces of Tabitha, A Womanist Reading" in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutic Reader* (Mitzi J. Smith, ed.). She is also the author of *Luke, Widows,*

Judges, and Stereotypes, which examines cultural stereotypes of African American women and men through the widow and judge in Luke 18:1–5.

Dr. Cleo LaRue Spring Quarter



Dr. Cleophus J. LaRue, Princeton Theological Seminary's Francis Landey Patton Professor Emeritus of Homiletics, received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Baylor University, and his M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary. He specializes in the theory and method of African American preaching and worship. An ordained minister in the National Baptist Convention of America, LaRue is the former pastor of two churches in Texas as well as the former interim pastor of churches in Harlem and Jamaica Queens, New York. He is a frequent speaker at churches, seminaries, and conferences throughout the country and is a member of the Academy of Homiletics.

A prolific author, Dr. LaRue has published several major publications. His latest work, *Toward a Deeper Understanding of Celebration in African American Preaching*, was released in Spring 2016. LaRue continues to lecture and preach throughout the United States. He has also spent time teaching homiletics in various settings on five continents. He is married to Lori Neff LaRue, and they reside in Princeton, New Jersey. His daughter, Coryell, resides in Houston, Texas.

Dr. Geoffrey Guns Summer Quarter



Rev. Dr. Geoffrey V. Guns is a native of Newport, Rhode Island. He is the son of Dr. Frank Guns Sr. and the late Rev. Quincey C. Guns. Dr. Guns has served as the Senior Pastor of the Second Calvary Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia, since June 26, 1983. He is a graduate of Norfolk State University (B.S.), Virginia Union University, Samuel Proctor School of Theology (M.Div.), and Howard University School of Religion (D. Min.). He also holds a certificate from George Washington University in digital marketing. He is a prolific writer, having written for *The Christian Education Informer*, *The National Baptist Voice*, and various quarterlies for the Sunday School Publishing Board—all of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. He has authored five books.

He is married to the former Rosetta Harding of Richmond, Virginia. They are the parents of two daughters: Kimberly Jackson, an educator; and Nicole Guns, an ordained minister. Dr. Guns and Lady Guns have two granddaughters: Kennedy and Sydney.

The Soul of a Nation

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The lessons of this Fall quarter emphasize the impact of disobedience to God and the influence of God's anointed transforming the believer's landscape.

Unit I, *"From Nomadic Tribes to Settled People,"* explores Israel's transformation from a nomadic people to a nation-state. To begin, God renewed His covenant with Joshua and a new generation of Israelites (lesson 1) in Joshua 1. In moving into the land (Joshua 4), Joshua led Israel to remember all the ways and times that God had provided for them, including crossing the Jordan (lesson 2). The book's core (chapters 6–12) outlines Israel's systematic defeat and destruction of other nations. This issue was problematic—as it has been used throughout the church's history to support imperialism and slavery. Lesson 3 offers an opportunity to unpack this violent narrative—the battles were not about Israel's destroying other nations but about God's fulfilling His promise of land (Joshua 11). While there is a thread of nationalism within the Bible, there is also a thread of universal love and acceptance, as represented by Rahab in Joshua 2–6 (lesson 4). Lesson 5 concludes the unit with the end of Joshua's life in Joshua 24, where he urged the people to remember their identity and remain faithful as the people of God.

Unit II, *"Lacking Leadership and a Moral Compass,"* explores the theological and moral complexity of the book of Judges. Despite Joshua's warnings to remain faithful and remember their covenant identity, the Israelites fell into apostasy soon after his death. They recognized their sinful ways, repented, and called on God when trouble ensued. As soon as God intervened to save them, they turned away. Lesson 6 addresses the cyclical pattern of apostasy, repentance, and divine rescue that repeats throughout the book of Judges and is exemplified in chapter 2. Lesson 7 shows God's faithfulness in raising leaders despite Israel's unfaithfulness (Judges 3). Lesson 8 demonstrates the book's theme, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes," as depicted in chapter 17. Despite God's faithfulness, the people consistently fell back into religious impurity and lawlessness. The pattern of leadership in Judges highlights the fact that "Israel had no king," which ultimately formed the rationale for Israel's petition for a king in 1 and 2 Samuel.

Unit III, *"Samuel: Prophet, Priest, Judge, and King Maker,"* centers on Samuel as a model of faithful leadership. Throughout Israel's history and into the New Testament, Samuel exemplified one who walked faithfully with God (Jeremiah 15:1; Hebrews 11:32). Lesson 9 introduces Samuel (1 Samuel 3) as one who responded to God's call at an early age. Lesson 10 (1 Samuel 4) reflects Israel's continued struggle for control of Canaan. There is both spiritual and political significance to the Philistines' capture of Israel's sacred ark of the covenant. In the events of lesson 11 (1 Samuel 7), the Ark was recovered, which marked an occasion in which Samuel showed his capacity to serve as God's prophet and judge by calling Israel to spiritual renewal and military readiness. Lesson 12 brings the study to a pivotal moment in Israel's history (1 Samuel 16) as Samuel clandestinely anointed David as God's chosen king. The unit concludes by leaping forward to David's coronation and his capture of Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 5, establishing the city as Israel's enduring center of worship and governance.

September 6, 2026

Lesson 1

THE COVENANT CONTINUES

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Renewing Our Commitments

YOUTH TOPIC: Renewing Our Commitments

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: God Calls Joshua to Leadership

CHILDREN'S TOPIC: Strength in Obedience

DEVOTIONAL READING
Daniel 10:18-21

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Joshua 1

PRINT PASSAGE: Joshua 1:1-11

KEY VERSE: Joshua 1:9

CHILDREN

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Joshua 1

PRINT PASSAGE: Joshua 1:1-11

KEY VERSE: Joshua 1:9

Joshua 1:1-11—KJV

NOW AFTER the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying,
2 Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.
3 Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses.
4 From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast.
5 There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.
6 Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I swore unto their fathers to give them.
7 Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which

Joshua 1:1-11—NIV

AFTER THE death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide:
2 "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites.
3 "I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.
4 "Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west.
5 "No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.
6 "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.
7 "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not

Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest.

8 This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

9 *Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.*

10 Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, saying,

11 Pass through the host, and command the people, saying, Prepare you victuals; for within three days ye shall pass over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land, which the LORD your God giveth you to possess it.

turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

8 “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

9 *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

10 So Joshua ordered the officers of the people:

11 “Go through the camp and tell the people, ‘Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.’”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: God provides for His people by developing leaders to guide them so that they may live faithfully in covenant with the Lord.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Understand that God provides for His people.
2. Realize that God develops leaders to guide believers.
3. Live faithfully in covenant with God.

POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

- The book of Joshua is named for the main character (though not the author) in the historical events that unfold in the book. Joshua picked up where Moses left off, leading Israel to the Promised Land. His leadership was often compared to Moses’.
- Understanding key themes in Deuteronomy is essential to understanding the books of Joshua and Judges.
- Deuteronomy lays out God’s instructions for

inhabiting the Promised Land, which was part of the covenant established while Israel was still in the wilderness under Moses’ leadership. The books of Joshua and Judges recount how the Israelites entered and inhabited the land.

- The book of Joshua is an interpretation of past events, and the author is concerned to understand that period of Israel’s history in the context of God’s covenantal instructions with a view to inspiring the present and future faithfulness of his audience.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

For this lesson, two important historical contexts are worth noting: the period in which the book of Joshua was written and the time of the events it describes. Beginning with the latter, Joshua 1 serves

as the transition point for the people of Israel, whom God, through Moses, freed from slavery. At this point, around 1250 BC, Moses had died, and the lesson presents God’s directive to Joshua to lead the people in taking the land promised to their forefathers. Joshua 6–12 shows the Israelites’ success in conquering the

land. However, archaeological excavations spanning more than a century have found little material evidence to support the historicity of the Israelites' conquest of major cities such as Ai, Bethel, Hazor, and, most famously, Jericho. While some researchers maintain that the biblical account in Joshua is historically accurate (and another review of the evidence or future evidence will substantiate it), most scholars believe that the physical evidence tells a different story (Dever, 23–74).

With the above information in mind, the other historical setting worth discussing is the time of the biblical authors, which is most likely the late seventh century (near the Babylonian exile), the mid-sixth century (during the Exile), or the fifth century (after the return from the Exile). Considering one of these historical settings for the biblical author, one might see the book of Joshua as a product of biblical writers' reimagining their past by drawing together ancient memories and written traditions, framing them into a larger message for their contemporaries, who are centuries removed from the story's setting. The first chapter of Joshua is part of that frame, speaking directly to the author's contemporaries (Coogan, 196–98).

The lesson of Joshua 1 in the time of its authors could be seen as God's call to obedience, courage, and faith in the Lord that either motivated Israelites to act properly in the face of impending doom, convicted the hearts of exiles contemplating their fate, or guided the Jews who returned from exile on how they should approach their post-exilic life in tune with God's desires.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

In our passage, Joshua is situated east of the Jordan River, which he would soon lead the people to cross. In pointing out the land God had promised to the Israelites, most terms would have been understood as specific areas familiar to the original audience. "The wilderness" is the exception; it is a generic term. "The Lebanon," which is based on a root word for "whiteness," refers to the snowcapped,

northernmost mountainous boundary of Canaan. "The great river, the Euphrates" is a prominent river along which major civilizations developed, and it is significantly to the east of Canaan. "The land of the Hittites" normally refers to a region in Anatolia, which is north of "the Lebanon." "The Great Sea" is the Mediterranean Sea. Interestingly, the term "land of Canaan" is not used to describe the land promised to the Israelites, which contrasts with some other places where God made a promise (see Exodus 6:4). Having some understanding of where these places are helps readers to see that Joshua 1 makes the Promised Land *much* more expansive than what the Israelites ever controlled historically.

PROMINENT CHARACTER(S) IN THE LESSON

Joshua: one of two Israelites allowed to live through the exodus from Egypt and enter the Promised Land. He modeled faithfulness to the Lord and, as a result, was successful in military conquest.

Lord: The God of the Israelites plays a central role in the text by giving guidance to Joshua. He expects covenant loyalty fitting with the commands in Deuteronomy.

Moses: remembered as the leader who partnered with God in rescuing the Israelites from slavery, who delivered them through the wilderness, who transmitted God's teachings to them as part of a covenant relationship with the Lord, and who mediated between God and the people.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Be strong (verse 6)—Hebrew: *châzaq* (khaw-zak'): to strengthen, prevail, harden, conquer; be courageous.

Commanded (verse 9)—Hebrew: *tsâvâh* (tsaw-vaw'): to [have] appointed, ordained, laid charge upon; gave orders.

Prosper (verse 7)—Hebrew: *sâkal* (saw-kal'): to be prudent, act wisely, have insight; "be successful" (NIV).

Servant (verse 1)—Hebrew: *'ebed* (eh'-bed): a slave, subject, worshipper; used in a special sense to refer to prophets and Levites—but in this case, it refers to Moses as the Lord's servant.

Stand (verse 5)—Hebrew: *yátsab* (yaw-tsab’): to set, place, or station oneself; to present oneself. The Lord promised the people of Israel that no one would be able to stand against them as He was with them.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction

- A. Transition into a New Season
- B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

- A. A Sure Promise in an Uncertain Time (Joshua 1:1-4)
- B. God’s Presence: A Reason for Courage (Joshua 1:5-6, 9)
- C. The Centrality of the Torah (Joshua 1:7-8)
- D. Stepping into Our Calling (Joshua 1:10-11)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Transition into a New Season

In times of transition, the question is how to discern what will be carried over from the past and what will be discarded. God’s actions to save Israel from oppression, the Torah as a covenant agreement between God and the people, divine promises to the ancestors of the Israelites, Moses’ leadership, the people’s murmuring/grumbling, and Israel’s obedience all loom large as themes from the recent past of the Exodus and wandering through the wilderness.

Our passage depicts the Lord’s motivating Joshua to adopt the proper mindset for this transition. As the leader guiding the people, Joshua was not Moses, but he was connected to Moses in positive ways. God assured Joshua that the divine promise of land was reliable, and faithfulness to the Torah would be a necessary stipulation. Since all of this suggests an optimistic outlook on the transition experience, it is natural for readers to regard this passage and its central character as a model worth following. However, a major caution or defensiveness should accompany any believer seeking faith lessons from Joshua’s actions. We cannot separate God’s call to “be strong and courageous” from the promise to dispossess indigenous people violently. Unfortunately, we can be prone to being seduced into believing that we are “the winners” in the story, and we end up identifying with the leader of a genocidal conquest and the crooked logic that supports his program as God’s will (Bailey, 2005). Thus, readers must practice careful discernment of what to bring forward and how to address it.

B. Biblical Background

The book of Joshua not only follows Deuteronomy in the arrangement of the Old Testament but also in much of its theology. The central theme of Deuteronomy is that God has made a covenant with the people of Israel. “A covenant is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance” (Mendenhall and Helion, 1149). The book of Deuteronomy models Israel’s relationship with God on the nearly universal ancient practice of covenants. Some scholars argue that biblical covenants between the Lord and the people (in places like Deuteronomy or Joshua 24) looked like a suzerain-vassal treaty,

which was a covenant where a greater power, like an emperor, was a suzerain who made an agreement to deal graciously with a lesser power—a vassal—who promised loyalty to the emperor. There are many distinctive elements to these ancient covenants, and the book of Deuteronomy aligns with them well enough that scholars assert that biblical authors adapted the secular suzerain-vassal treaty to their sacred understanding of their relationship with God. Other scholars argue that it fits better with land-grant treaties, in which a more powerful party grants land to a less powerful one (Knight, 2003, 339).

People must adhere to certain rules and receive the benefits that accompany covenant faithfulness. This serves as background for the

central exhortation in our passage: “be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6, 9b, NIV). In keeping with the reciprocity of covenants, the people expected benefits from God in return for loyalty to the Lord alone and for maintaining the stipulations given to them. More specifically, the covenant in Deuteronomy promised success in taking the Promised Land if the people kept their part of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 30:15-20). With God’s help, the Israelites could take the land because God had proven capable of keeping the suzerain’s side of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 1:30-31). The only question regarding the potential success or failure of Joshua and the people was whether they would fulfill their side of the covenant.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. A Sure Promise in an Uncertain Time (Joshua 1:1-4)

The immediate setting for the passage is the wake of death. It was not just any death; it was “after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD” (verse 1). Moses had played a monumental role in the liberation of the people and their gaining a new identity as God’s people in a covenant relationship with the Lord. Moses was the law giver and the ideal prophet, bringing the word of God to the people, interceding on the people’s behalf before the Lord, and modeling obedience to God. Moses’ death was an apt conclusion to his extended speech that made up nearly all of the previous book, Deuteronomy. However, Moses’ death could also evoke frightening instability as the people enter the Promised Land.

In the wilderness, the Israelites expressed fear upon their spies’ report that the land of Canaan was full of fortified cities whose inhabitants were tall and strong (see Numbers 13). Now, those fears, which led God to proclaim the death of almost all the fearful adults (see

Numbers 14:26-38), could resurface as paralyzing fears. Fear nearly ended God’s salvific mission. But when everyone else was afraid, Joshua was one of two spies (with Caleb) who exhorted the people not to act out of fear. Even though the people of Canaan might be intimidating, Joshua and Caleb asserted that “the LORD is with us; fear them not” (Numbers 14:9). In our passage, God was calling on Joshua to lead the people, and Joshua would need to bring back the same message: *God is with us, therefore, we should not fear in seizing this Promised Land.* Throughout the first five books of the Bible, God repeatedly promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

How should readers engage with God’s biblical promise to violently dispossess people and give the land to His chosen people? Carolyn J. Sharp’s accessible commentary for contemporary Christians continually emphasizes that faithful Christians need to resist “the distorted claims in Joshua that God willed

the forced displacement and extermination of entire people groups” (Sharp, 54). We should not ignore the historical uses of the Bible by Christians and Jews who have called upon Joshua as a theological justification supporting the displacement or killing of “others” (Jews, Muslims, Native Americans, Palestinians, and so forth). Instead, we must be critical of such uses of the Bible and intentionally refrain from reproducing them. And we should not reduce the indigenous people in the text to unflattering (or voiceless) depictions that the biblical authors project upon them. Instead, we should recognize the danger that such a way of thinking poses to our dehumanization of others today, and we ought to imagine the full humanity (the culture, love for their land, faithfulness to their gods, connections to their families, etc.) of the indigenous people in the text. We should not celebrate the conquest as God’s bringing about that which is unambiguously good, but we should reimagine how its victims would have felt the consequences of the conquest. Our faithful reading should engage with our imagination along with our critical judgment and search for Christ’s message in the story.

B. God’s Presence: A Reason for Courage (Joshua 1:5-6, 9)

The words “be strong and courageous” (verses 6 and 9, NIV) go together. Perhaps the “courage” (*’amets* in Hebrew) is a call to be alert. Some lexicons say it relates to being “fleet-footed”; others translate it as “stalwart.” In the broader narrative, this motivation echoes the advice Joshua and Caleb gave to the people in Numbers 14 after they spied out the land of Canaan. This is the advice that Moses gave to the people and to Joshua three times in one of his final speeches (see Deuteronomy 31:6, 7, 23).

Why should Joshua and the people have courage? According to Joshua 1:5, courage is

grounded in God’s presence and partnership. Back in Exodus 3, God met Moses, who did not yet know the God of Israel. Moses questioned why God would select him to bring freedom (see Exodus 3:11). God had several answers, but each response included the reminder for Moses to remember that God would be with him (see Exodus 3:12; 3:17; 4:12). In fact, the exact phrase “*I will be with you*” is used in God’s first and final response to Moses. In other words, God’s presence and partnership are meant to dispel fears and ignite courage. This fits with a broader ancient belief that deities take sides in people’s military conflicts. As Deuteronomy 9:3b states concerning victory against the impressive Anakim, “He [God] will defeat them and subdue them before you” (NRSVUE). The book of Joshua conveys the same idea, with God’s assurance that no one can stop Joshua: “As I was with Moses, so *I will be with you*” (Joshua 1:5b, NRSVUE).

God’s promise of solidarity was accompanied by an assurance of what God would not do: *I will not fail or forsake you* (verse 5). A persistent theme throughout God’s journey with the people in the wilderness (leading up to the book of Joshua) is their fickle or disloyal behavior (covenant disloyalty). When the emancipated people made it to Mount Sinai, God gave the Ten Commandments and other regulations (see Exodus 19–31), they made a covenant promising their loyalty to the covenant (see Exodus 24), and God gave Moses the tablets of the covenant (see Exodus 31:18). The very next event was the people’s disloyalty to their covenant by creating and worshipping the golden calf (see Exodus 32). However, the Lord promised to be consistent . . . to never fall into the type of disloyalty that matched the failures of God’s people.

Verse 9 reiterates that the people needed to be strong and courageous and “do not be [...] dismayed.” The Hebrew verb for “dismayed”

(*hata*) may be better translated as “terrified,” and it shares the same consonants as the term for the people group the Hittites, mentioned in verse 4. It is interesting that, when mentioning the native people living in the Promised Land, only the Hittites are named in our passage. In other places, God’s promise of land includes listing anywhere from two to ten peoples (see Genesis 15:19-21; Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:2; 34:11; Deuteronomy 7:1; 20:17; Joshua 3:10; 9:1; 12:8; 24:11; Judges 3:5)—and the Canaanites (see Genesis 10:18-19; 24:3; 50:11; Exodus 13:11; Deuteronomy 11:30; Joshua 7:9) or the Amorites (see Genesis 15:16; Joshua 7:7; 24:18; Judges 6:10) are sometimes brought forth as a synecdoche or allusion for the longer list. It was not unusual for ancient writers to use a single group as an umbrella term for several people groups. What is unusual is *that biblical authors use the Hittites as a stand-in* for the larger list. It does not happen elsewhere in the Bible, and the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation used as the basis for Bibles in Orthodox Christian traditions) does not mention “the land of the Hittites.” In other words, “the land of the Hittites” is a phrase that could have been omitted or described using a different people group. Thinking about the literary thrust of our passage, this might be significant. Although the words are not technically etymologically connected, it is not hard to imagine a Hebrew speaker hearing or reading the term “the Hittites” (*hahittim*) as associated with the Hebrew command “do not be terrified” (*al tehat*), since both “Hittite” and “terror” share the same root letters. Thus, in mentioning only the land of the Hittites, Joshua 1 is a call to “be strong and courageous” while wresting the land from the people who strike terror.

C. The Centrality of the Torah (Joshua 1:7-8)

The Torah, referred to as “all the law” (verse

7) and “this book of the law” (verse 8), is central to the admonition at the beginning of Joshua. Perhaps it should not be translated as “the law.” Scholars often point out that the Hebrew “Torah” can be translated as “law,” but this seems to unhelpfully narrow readers’ understanding of what Torah means in the Old Testament. It refers to the teachings that God gave through Moses to the people in the wilderness, and these teachings are broader than is traditionally understood by the term “law.” For example, aside from what we conventionally think of as the function of laws in resolving wrongful actions, there are instructions such as how to hold festivals (see Exodus 23:14-19) and interact with others in the community after giving birth (see Leviticus 12), and so forth. While most people today would not regard such guidance as “law,” it may be more appropriate to translate Torah as “instruction” or “teaching,” a term that encompasses all these and more. Thinking of Torah as God’s teachings also aligns with the way the book of Proverbs treats the Torah as the wisdom that parents should impart to the next generation (for example, see Proverbs 3:1).

As the beginning of the book of Psalms presents God’s Torah as the starting point for all that follows, Joshua 1 claims that the Torah was the central text guiding the people. In fact, the same phrase is used about the Torah in both, you shall “meditate on it day and night” (Joshua 1:8; see Psalm 1:2). The Hebrew for “meditate” is a word that means something like “muttering.” In the positive sense exemplified in Joshua 1 and Psalm 1, it is the repeated rehearsal of what one wants to embody more fully: muttering the Torah to oneself day and night commits it to memory. In a negative sense, it can be the grumbling that people do in plotting together (see Psalm 2:1). God, in our passage, was calling on Joshua to meditate on the Torah and thus commit it to his heart. This advice for a leader aligns with the

Torah's command that a king have a copy of the Torah written for him, which he should read all the days of his life (see Deuteronomy 17:18-19). It is a call to obedience with the benefit that those who follow it—leaders who heed this teaching—will have several outcomes. They will learn to “fear the LORD” (Deuteronomy 17:19), meaning they will have the proper reverence for God. Rehearsing the Torah also means that the leaders be constrained to follow the commandments (see Joshua 1:8) rather than be motivated toward “exalting himself above other members of the community” (Deuteronomy 17:20, NRS-VUE). But there could also be a more selfish rationale for strict adherence to God's Torah: verses 7 and 8 emphasize that doing so would make one “successful.”

The claim that Joshua would be “successful” can be interpreted in different ways, even though the context clearly implies victory in the land. The Hebrew root is associated with “understanding” and occurs a couple of dozen times as a verb in the Psalms and Proverbs, denoting understanding or wisdom. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses lamented the people's lack of wisdom and understanding, noting that if they were wise, they would understand” the disaster that ensued from not following God's instructions (see verses 28-29). Thus, while the verb contextually foretold the prospect of military success for Joshua and the Israelites as a benefit of meditating on the Torah, it also implies a greater “understanding” (perhaps prudence) that would result from meditating on the Torah day and night.

D. Stepping into Our Calling **(Joshua 1:10-11)**

The final verses of our passage shift from God's addressing Joshua to Joshua's guidance of the people. Following our passage, the remainder of Joshua 1 provides more specific directions that Joshua gave and the reactions of certain tribes

whose promises of land concern what scholars refer to as Transjordan, the territory east of the Jordan River. Fighting men from tribes who would dwell in the Transjordan (see 1:14-15) must join the rest of the tribes of Israel in preparing to cross over the Jordan and take possession of the land that God had given them to possess (verse 11). With this command to the people, we see that Joshua had replaced Moses as the intermediary between God's word and the Israelites.

Near the end of Deuteronomy, Joshua is presented as Moses' successor, like in our passage—which shows him as the one the Lord would speak to after Moses' death. The narrator in Deuteronomy states, “Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him, and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:9, NRS-VUE); the narrator goes on to comment that Moses was unique in his relationship with God and the miracles that God did through him (verses 10-11). Without discounting Moses' matchlessness, texts such as Joshua 1:11 present Joshua as successful in the manner of his predecessor. In contrast to a longer metanarrative of biblical stories showing failure of the Israelites and their leaders to follow their covenant with God, several passages show Joshua as a faithful servant like Moses who led the people to cross a body of water miraculously (see Joshua 4), succeeded in ways fulfilling the commands of God (see 10:40; 11:12), and exhorted the people to remain faithful to God (see 24:1-15).

As we follow the logic of this lesson, we should admire the traits that God was calling on Joshua to develop in this transitional moment of nation building. Across both testaments, there was an unrelenting urge from God for the people not to fear. The call of God on our lives is to act with faith instead of fear. In this passage, faith is understood as the belief that God's promises

(verse 2) and the power of God's solidarity ("I will be with you," verse 6) should generate courage. Faith also means trusting that following the commandments will yield success.

Before Joshua's first battle, an angel of the LORD met him (see Joshua 5:13-15). It is a brief and enigmatic passage that provides critical information about Joshua and God. On the way to Jericho, Joshua saw "a man" with a sword drawn. Joshua's immediate reaction was to find out the man's intentions. Still, the words Joshua used are telling: "Are you one of us or one of our adversaries?" (5:13, NRSVUE). Here, we see that Joshua's courage is zeal—a passion—so single-minded that he could not conceive of anyone outside of this binary of "us" and "our adversaries." He had reduced the whole world to characters in his quest to fulfill God's commands. But this "man" turned out to be God's angel, and he explicitly said that Joshua was wrong—instead responding that he had come as a commander of the army of the LORD (verse 14). Joshua responded with worship and obedience to what God commanded.

Regarding our passage, there is a lesson for how we should think of Joshua's leadership: The call on his life (as with our own) may be a blessing to claim the promises that God had and has made—it might require courage, and it will surely come with greater faithfulness to God's commandments.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In preparing him for action, God exhorted Joshua to be strong and courageous. Recognizing the past and present weaponization of the book of Joshua, we should exercise great caution in responsibly transmitting God's lesson from the text to our lives. In practice, we can remember three major points that contribute to courage in the face of terror. First, God is with us. With this assurance, we need not fear. But we must remain vigilant to ensure that solidarity with God is grounded in our continual effort to align with God's ways, not in presuming that God must follow our interests. Second, meditating on God's Word can foster understanding and a walk of confidence rather than fear. When we learn God's word, we walk closer to God. Finally, we should remain vigilant about God's mysterious work in the world rather than narrow-mindedly fitting everything into God's calling on our lives.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank You for being the God who goes with us. We walk with You in anticipation of the promises that You have in store for us because You love us. Please help us to follow Your Word, bask in Your presence, and exude a spirit of strength and courage that affirms that we know that the one with whom we journey is powerful enough to see us through anything. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(August 31–September 6, 2026)

The Covenant Continues

MONDAY, August 31: "More than Victorious" (Romans 8:31-39)

TUESDAY, September 1: "See What God Has Promised" (Genesis 13:14-18)

WEDNESDAY, September 2: "The Promised Land Revealed" (Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

THURSDAY, September 3: "God's Promised Rest" (Hebrews 4:1-10)

FRIDAY, September 4: "God's New Covenant" (Hebrews 10:14-18)

SATURDAY, September 5: "'Whom Shall I Fear?'" (Psalm 27)

SUNDAY, September 6: "Be Strong and Courageous" (Joshua 1:1-11)

September 13, 2026

Lesson 2

REMEMBER GOD'S ACTIONS

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Family Legacies

YOUTH TOPIC: Family Legacies

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Follow God's Instructions

CHILDREN'S TOPIC: Stones and Zones

DEVOTIONAL READING
Luke 8:35-39

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Joshua 4

PRINT PASSAGE: Joshua 4:14-24

KEY VERSES: Joshua 4:21b-22

CHILDREN

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Joshua 4

PRINT PASSAGE: Joshua 4:14-18, 21-22

KEY VERSES: Joshua 4:21b-22

Joshua 4:14-24—KJV

14 On that day the LORD magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life.

15 And the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying,

16 Command the priests that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan.

17 Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan.

18 And it came to pass, when the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD were come up out of the midst of Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up unto the dry land, that the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as they did before.

19 And the people came up out of Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, in the east border of Jericho.

20 And those twelve stones, which they took out of Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal.

21 And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying,

Joshua 4:14-24—NIV

14 That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him all the days of his life, just as they had stood in awe of Moses.

15 Then the LORD said to Joshua,

16 "Command the priests carrying the ark of the covenant law to come up out of the Jordan."

17 So Joshua commanded the priests, "Come up out of the Jordan."

18 And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before.

19 On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho.

20 And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.

21 He said to the Israelites, "In the future when

When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, **What mean these stones?**

22 Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land.

23 For the LORD your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red sea, which he dried up from before us, until we were gone over:

24 That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the LORD your God for ever.

your descendants ask their parents, **‘What do these stones mean?’**

22 “tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’

23 “For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over.

24 “He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: We are instructed to remember God’s saving actions through memorials and rituals so that we can fully understand His steadfast love for us.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Adhere to the instruction to remember God’s saving actions.
2. Recognize memorials and rituals established to commemorate God’s goodness.
3. Fully understand God’s steadfast love for us.

POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

- Some research on the biblical location of Gilgal suggests that the name may have served as a generic title for a camp or religious site and may not necessarily reference an exact geographic location. This is a constructive possibility since biblical references have differing views on its location (see <https://www.HolyLandSite.com/gilgal>).
- The explicit connection of God’s saving act in parting the Red Sea in Exodus (see Exodus 14) is also visible in God’s redemptive intervention in

- parting the waters of the Jordan River (Joshua 4).
- During the Jericho campaign, the Jordan crossing is remarkable as an act of worship.
- There is a clear intention to provide a spiritual/theological interpretation of the crossing for future generations (see Joshua 4:6-7, 20-24).
- The “twelve stones” used to build the stone memorial at Gilgal are symbolic representations of the twelve tribes of Israel. This intentional representation is included again in the book of Judges.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

In the region of the ancient Israelites and their neighbors, large pillars and unnatural arrangements of uncut stones protruding from the landscape were peculiar and conspicuous enough to warrant an origin story. Across cultures, storytelling is a crucial means by which a community explores and shapes its identity. By combining these two elements—the

physical structures and the communal impulse—the biblical authors articulated their people’s origin stories in response to the noteworthy stones they observed in the world around them. Joshua 4:9 (NRSVUE) links stones visible in the bed of the river Jordan with storytelling in a community chronologically removed from the event: “Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing

the ark of the covenant had stood, *and they are there to this day*” (emphasis added). With the broader story in Joshua 3–4 there is another set of twelve stones set up at Gilgal and instructions for how to answer children who ask, “What do these stones mean?” (verse 21, NIV). The biblical authors compelled their audience to talk about these stones with stories much more significant than simply answering the question “Who put this here?” In addition to remembering that twelve men and Joshua brought the two sets of twelve stones to their current places, the broader story gives the community license to reflect on important theological matters like the miraculous power of God, the people’s past obedience to the word of the Lord, and the presence of the Lord among “us.”

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

At the conclusion of our passage, the Israelites camped at Gilgal, where they set up stones. The Hebrew term for this place has the definite article “the” before it. Thus, it should be literally translated as “the Gilgal.” Elsewhere in the Bible, the noun *gilgal* is used in reference to roundness, like a “wheel” (Isaiah 28:28). The noun seems to be based on a verb (*galal*) that means “to roll” or “roll away.” Joshua 5:9 has some word play in explaining that this important location received the name “the Gilgal” because, in reference to a mass circumcision performed, “The LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have *rolled* [Hebrew: *galal*] away from you the disgrace of Egypt’” (Kotter, 1022).

What is implied is that the ancient Israelites regarded Gilgal as a site of longstanding significance—for the start of the monarchy and its association with corruption later evident in Saul’s actions. After a victory in battle, he offered a sacrifice at Gilgal that he thought was pleasing to God, but Samuel rebuked him (see 1 Samuel 14:8–15). Then, in opposition to God’s command, Saul failed to kill all the Amale-

kites, a group that God had been at war with since they attacked the Israelites in the wilderness (see Exodus 17:8–16). Samuel, as a prophet representing God’s will, rebuked Saul’s actions at Gilgal (see 1 Samuel 15). Saul’s failures at this location stand in marked contrast to Joshua’s successes in our lesson.

PROMINENT CHARACTER(S) IN THE LESSON

Ark: In Joshua 4, we see “the ark.” It is also referred to as “the ark of the covenant” (verse 9), “the ark of the LORD” (verse 11), and “the ark of the testimony” (verse 16). Although it is an object, the Ark is, in a sense, a character in the narrative—whose presence symbolizes God.

Joshua: Formerly the assistant of Moses, he was now an ideal leader—focused on God and obedient to his mission.

Priests: workers who performed sacred obligations, particularly the transport and use of holy objects. In our passage, they were responsible for the Ark, which, if not handled correctly, could be deadly (see 2 Samuel 6:3–11).

Twelve Leaders: God commanded Joshua to select twelve men—one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Their participation as individuals represented that of their entire tribes.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Camped (verse 19)—Hebrew: *chânâh* (khaw-naw’): pitched tents, dwelled, rested; “encamped” (KJV).

Command (verse 16)—Hebrew: *tsâvâh* (tsaw-vaw’): to charge, appoint, ordain, give charge over, set in order.

Covenant (verse 18)—Hebrew: *berîyth* (ber-eeth’): a treaty, alliance, league, ordinance, pledge. God’s covenant with the Israelites included making Israel God’s treasured possession.

Stones (verse 20)—Hebrew: *’eben* (eh’-ben): weights; sacred objects (as memorials); plummets. Twelve stones were taken from the Jordan to be used

as a reminder to the Israelites of how they crossed the river on dry land.

Waters (verse 18)—**Hebrew: *mayim* (mah'-yim):** watercourses; streams of water.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction

- A. Crossing the Jordan across Generations
- B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

- A. Exultation and Fear
(Joshua 4:14)
- B. Retreading the Path of God's Miracles
(Joshua 4:15-18)
- C. Taking the Story as Our Own—or Not
(Joshua 4:19-24)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Crossing the Jordan across Generations

For the ancient Israelites, the crossing of the Jordan served as a powerful moment symbolizing their continuity with a great past and a sign of future prosperity. However, communities of faith that adopt the same imagery have employed different strategies for integrating the image of the Jordan into their narratives. For example, the theme of crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land has a rich history among African American Christians, where it serves as a symbolic threshold marking the boundary before reaching liberation. Just like Joshua 4 links crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land with crossing the Red Sea in escape from Pharaoh, African American spirituals like “My Army Cross Over” use the medium of song to express hope for crossing over “de mighty river” or “de river Jordan,” and that “Pharaoh’s army drowned.” Developed by African Americans who endured the evils of slavery, this biblical interpretation testifies to the liberating hope that this story has inspired and can continue to inspire. In this spiritual and others like it, the image of crossing the Jordan can function on multiple levels: it can be the spiritual freedom that comes with Christ, the physical freedom that comes with escaping slavery, or the freedom that comes from crossing from death into the afterlife. In their contexts, each of these meanings could be powerful. Christians today can draw on the image of crossing the Jordan in ways relevant to contemporary contexts.

B. Biblical Background

Our passage is the tail-end of the first of three major miracles in the book of Joshua. Chapters 3–4 depict the crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground because God miraculously caused its waters on one side to stand “still, rising up in a single heap.” Waters on the other side “were [wholly] cut off” (Joshua 3:16). The second major miracle was the defeat of the great walled city of Jericho. Following God’s instructions precisely, the army did not lay siege to the city’s walls with human military force; they trusted that obedience to God’s commands would secure victory. Following progressively revealed instructions over the span of a week, the people circled the city with the Ark and trumpets without attacking. They were instructed to shout on the seventh day, and God caused the

walls to crumble (see Joshua 6). In the third major miracle, Joshua prayed for the sun and moon to stop going through their regular circuit. The Lord listened to Joshua's prayer: "The sun stopped in midheaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day" (Joshua 10:13, NRSVUE). This trio of miracles, like the plagues, signs, and wonders God used during the Exodus to free the people from Egyptian slavery, show that the point of our passage is to emphasize God's centrality to the

events going on. As the Egyptian magicians remarked in response to one of the plagues, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19).

While other miraculous things happened in the events of the book of Joshua, these three stand out because, as Carolyn J. Sharp says, "All three involve YHWH's dramatic manipulation of normally immovable elements of the created order—flood waters, stone, and heavenly luminaries—to the benefit of the covenant people" (Sharp, 39–40).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Exultation and Fear

(Joshua 4:14)

"On that day" refers to the miraculous day when God brought the Israelites across the Jordan River so that they could arrive on the western side, where they could go on to take the Promised Land from its inhabitants. The miracle involved God's causing the water of the Jordan to stop flowing at a time when it was flooding (see Joshua 3:15), the priests carrying the Ark across the dry bed of the river, twelve men (representing each tribe of Israel collecting stones from the river, and thousands and thousands of people making it across.

After this, the people looked up to Joshua. However, this verse emphasizes that God was the cause of their esteem. The Hebrew verb used here is translated in the NRSVUE as "exalted," but it literally means "to cause to grow," "to magnify," or "to make great."

To say that God is the cause of exalting Joshua into a position of praise is not meant to negate that Joshua had any praiseworthy merits. The Bible first mentions Joshua as a military commander whom Moses chose to lead a successful battle against Amalekite aggressors.

In fact, the victory was attributed to Joshua. After the battle was won, the Lord told Moses to write in a scroll a message (about future military ambitions against the Amalekites) and recite it "in the ears of Joshua" (Exodus 17:14). As they continued in the wilderness, Joshua had the privilege of ascending Mount Sinai with Moses, the distinction of staying in the tent of meeting where Moses would meet with God, and the uniqueness (with Caleb) of holding onto faith in God when spying the land of Canaan—which revealed the terrifying stature of the people of the land (see Numbers 14). The biblical phrase "God exalted Joshua" does not downplay Joshua's prior work, as if none of it contributed to his greatness in the eyes of the people. Instead, this verse fulfills what God predicted in advance and reflects a broader theology that many Christians have come to embrace: God is the ultimate cause of positive developments in life and, therefore, is worthy of thanks. When taken to heart, it should breed an upwelling of gratitude to God and humility that tempers one's ego.

Aside from what this text says about God's relationship to Joshua, it also says something

about the people's relationship to Joshua: "they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses" (Joshua 4:14, NRSVUE). The Hebrew root here is *yara'*. It is a common word frequently translated as "to fear." The range of meanings for this word includes fear as an emotional state; cases in which that emotional state is specifically tied to the threat of harm; fear as reverence or awe; and idioms about righteous living and proper worship. In other words, one might say that *yara'* indicates reverence or awe because someone would naturally show reverence to or stand in awe of another who induces fear (Harris et al., 399–400).

What are the downsides of a leadership model that incorporates fear as a motivation for devotion?

B. Retreading the Path of God's Miracles **(Joshua 4:15-18)**

To modern ears, verses 15-17 can seem pointlessly redundant. After God gave a command to Joshua on what to say, why would biblical authors feel the need to rewrite Joshua as speaking the same command *verbatim*? Following this modern reasoning, the Good News Translation avoids redundancy: "Then the LORD told Joshua to command the priests carrying the Covenant Box to come up out of the Jordan. Joshua did so" (GNT). An explanation of the text like that used in the GNT misses that the structure of the sentences in these verses conveys the message just as much as—if not more than—their content. A repeated refrain in Deuteronomy is a call for precise obedience to God's commandments expressed with some variation of the phrase "do not turn aside from it to the right or to the left" (see Deuteronomy 5:32; 17:11; 28:14). In fact, in one expression of this call for precise

obedience, it is directed at the future kings of Israel who, by reading the Torah, would diligently follow it, "neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left" (Deuteronomy 17:20, NRSVUE). According to Joshua 4:14, God had just exalted Joshua—he did not exalt himself—and the repetition of God's command coming to Joshua followed by his repeating it without any change shows that this was a leader whose exultation was not problematic, since he was exemplary in obeying God's word.

The priests whom Joshua addressed were carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord, a religious artifact of enormous significance in the Bible. This Hebrew word, translated as "ark" (*aron*), is distinct from the Hebrew word translated as "Noah's ark" (*tevalh*). That similarity comes about in our English translations. *Aron* can simply mean "a chest or box." Biblical authors differ on the appearance of this box: in Exodus 25:10-22, it is acacia wood covered with gold overlays, a pure gold cover, and two golden cherubim; but Deuteronomy 10:1-5 states that it is just made of acacia wood.

Regardless of whether it was elaborate or plain, it was considered to have holy power. Only the priests may be near it. Other than the priests who were carrying the Ark, others must stay about half a mile away while following it (see Joshua 3:4). They knew the importance of the Ark as related to God's presence. In some texts, the ark of the covenant is described as "the footstool of our God" (1 Chronicles 28:2). In this way, the movement of the Ark is associated with the movement of the invisible divine throne upon which the Lord sat. In other texts, it is treated as a sort of extension of God's presence. In the people's wandering

through the wilderness, Moses would address God directly “whenever the ark set out,” saying “Arise, O LORD, let your enemies be scattered and your foes flee before you” (Numbers 10:35, NRSVUE) (Seow, 1992).

Guided by the word of the Lord and the Ark, which symbolizes God’s presence, Joshua led the people to reenact a mirrored version of a scene from the Exodus. The obvious similarity is that Joshua 4 and Exodus 14 both describe God’s people crossing a body of water on dry ground, made possible by God’s miraculous intervention. However, in their details, there are opposites. In Exodus, the people were in a panic because an army was pursuing them, and the power of God helped them escape by passing through where the waters should be and killing their pursuers with those same waters. Joshua 4 shows the opposite as their opponents were not pursuing the Israelites; it was the Israelites who were coming to attack them. Instead of God’s miraculously making a path through the waters to save them, God was making a path for them to go and dispossess the Canaanites.

C. Taking the Story as Our Own—or Not (Joshua 4:19-24)

The biblical writers were not only remembering their past in the sense of their recalling what happened, but, more precisely, they were remembering their past as in putting the different “members” or parts together to create an entire body, an identity for the people. Apparently, the whole book of Joshua (like the rest of the Bible) has been passed down by believers with the intent that people in subsequent generations would be formed and informed by its content. However, Joshua 4 is the only passage in the book of Joshua that provides explicit instructions for transmitting

stories to children. Here, God told Joshua and the people that a story of crossing the Jordan on dry ground should be the response in the indeterminate future whenever their children asked them questions about these stones at Gilgal (see Joshua 4:6, 21-22). A story of twelve stones brought together as a unified monument of disparate parts metaphorically symbolizes a demand to recall kinship and togetherness despite distinctions. It is a message of unity in diversity.

The story intended to accompany these stones is underscored by several important points in Joshua’s speech to the Israelites. First is the miracle itself. Joshua did not reduce the crossing to anything less than a miracle by God, who exhibits supernatural power over nature to allow all of Israel to “[cross] over this Jordan on dry land” (verse 22). The second major point is its comparison to the crossing of the Red Sea. Joshua made this connection explicit (verse 23) and thus placed the actions of the Israelites at that moment in continuity with a longer history of partnership with God. An audience (imagined here as “your children”) that was asking about a particular monument they saw was not only being told what the memorial was or a story about how it got there, but they were also being told that they played a part in the story of “these stones” connected to God’s people—our people.

A third major point is to recognize what our remembering this event says about God. The explicit message is “that the hand of the LORD is mighty” (verse 24, NRSVUE). In Psalm 118, “the right hand of the LORD” is associated with strength and salvation for the righteous; it can involve punishment of God’s followers, but ultimately it is the help that God’s people rely upon (see verses 10-18). In Egypt, “the hand of the LORD” brought

devastating wonders in the process of showing God's power to release the Israelites from slavery (see Exodus 9:3). However, Joshua 4 serves as a call for remembering the crossing of the Jordan; memorializing the event also is a call to remember the miraculous and salvific power of God.

Given what God had done for the people of Israel, an interesting point is that this not only was a liturgy among Israelite families and involving twelve stones representing their twelve tribes but it was also an act meant to communicate to "all the people of the earth" (verse 24). As in the episode of the crossing of the Red Sea, God is looking more broadly at the impact on those outside of the chosen people: "the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 14:4c). In these mirrored passages, those outside of the chosen people knowing the Lord can be a terrifying revelation. In the passage for our lesson, the Amorite and Canaanite kings recognized God's power and melted in dread (see Joshua 5:1).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Putting all this together, we see that meticulous obedience to God's Word entails walking in God's presence and opening a way for God's people to possess His promises. The biblical authors of Joshua likely wrote these

texts at a time when God's promises appeared in jeopardy—perhaps while fearing the threat of exile or after experiencing its devastation. Retelling a story that links obedience to God's presence and promises (particularly a promise of land) would convey a message of hope and motivation to repent, understood as turning toward a commitment to follow God.

The promise in the text is about possession of the land, which also means that it is about the dispossession of its indigenous inhabitants. Although they are not the focus of Joshua 3–4, the Canaanite, Hittite, Hivite, Perizzite, Gergashite, Amorite, and Jebusite natives (mentioned in 3:10) are immediately reintroduced in 5:1. What does it mean to think about the impact of God's promises for us, along with a broad lens that takes into account what it means for others? What about the people who look back and see a history of their people's being conquered?

PRAYER

Your children call to You, O Lord—young and old, the hungry and the overfed, the guided and the misguided, the praised and the persecuted. You have guided us across the waters and given us a glimpse of the Promised Land. Let us bear witness to Your faithfulness across generations. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(September 7-13, 2026)

Remember God's Actions

MONDAY, September 7: "Hold Fast to the Traditions" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-17)

TUESDAY, September 8: "Victory at the Sea" (Exodus 14:21-31)

WEDNESDAY, September 9: "The Lord Goes Before Us" (Numbers 10:29-36)

THURSDAY, September 10: "Do Not Be Afraid" (John 6:15-21)

FRIDAY, September 11: "Remember God's Mighty Deeds" (Psalm 77:11-20)

SATURDAY, September 12: "Remember Jesus' Saving Work" (1 Corinthians 11:23-27)

SUNDAY, September 13: "Crossing into the Promised Land" (Joshua 4:14-24)

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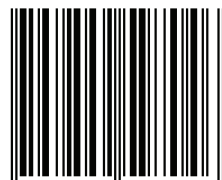
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ISBN 979-8-89959-704-6



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