

May 22-26, 2023 Edition

The Year_(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 73

Graduates Weekend 2022

What Is The Key To Success?

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to spend some time looking at what God says are the keys to success in our lives by focusing in on Joshua (who is one of my all time favorite Old Testament people and who I feel like I have a lot in common with- no not that I'm a mighty warrior like Joshua was but that he was terrified when God promoted him to a position where he felt like he was in over his head). When last we left our story through the Bible Moses and the Israelites were encamped around Mt. Sinai- a detour God took them through on their way to inhabit the land promised to Abraham by God. When they leave Sinai they went straight toward the promised land and camped just west of the Jordan river. Moses sent 12 scouts across the Jordan to scope out what they could expect when they crossed over into their inheritance. When the scouts came back they told about a land "flowing with milk and honey." A sentence that since has become synonymous with wealth and fertility. But there was a problem:

Caleb said, "Let's go now and take possession of the land. We should be more than able to conquer it." But the men who had gone with him said, "We can't attack those people! They're too strong for us!" So they began to spread lies among the Israelites about the land they had explored. Numbers 13:30-32 (NLT)

The problem was, the Israelites almost as a single unit decided to listen to the 10 scouts' lies and refused to move into the promised land- even with God on their side. Why? Did they not believe that God could give them victory? Probably not- but what the Israelites learned over the years was that sometimes even though there was a victory there was still sacrifice involved and they didn't want to sacrifice at that point.

So God had to get the Israelites to a point where they could/would inhabit the land He had promised them. He turned them around and left them in the wilderness wandering around for 40 years- until everyone who was an adult when they stood at the banks of the Jordan river and refused to enter had died except for the two scouts who had faith enough to trust God and urged Israel to trust God as well. Even Moses doesn't make it into the promised land (that's another story for another day). And so Joshua and Caleb are the only ones from that generation to enter the promised land. And God chooses Joshua to be the new leader of Israel.

Moses my servant is dead. Therefore, the time has come for you to lead these people, the Israelites, across the Jordan River into the land I am giving them.... No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you. Joshua 1:2-5 (NLT)

Now Joshua had been Moses' second in command for 40 years in the wilderness. He was a mighty warrior and his bravery was unquestioned. And yet in Joshua chapter one what we read is the pep talk to end all pep talks. Take a look at part of what God said to Joshua:

Be strong and courageous, for you are the one who will lead these people to possess all the land I swore to their ancestors I would give them... Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you.

Joshua 1:6-7 (NLT)

Twice in just two verses God tells Joshua to be "strong and courageous". It must not have been sinking in because God finally resorts to military-speak- something Joshua would have understood:

I command you- be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9 (NLT)

Why is Joshua so nervous? Well, I'll give you a hint- it wasn't the battles with the enemy that he knew were ahead that had him shaking in his boots. I think what was making Joshua nervous was the fact that God was asking him to do something even Moses could never do- wrangle the Israelites. The people of God were stubborn, stiff necked and did more than their share of grumbling and murmuring (isn't that a great word? It even sounds like what it is- murmur murmur murmur...) and complaining. Now God was asking Joshua to try to do what Moses- the greatest leader in the history of God's people- could never do. And I can imagine it made him nervous.

But Joshua took God's pep talk to heart. He would live a life of courage that is not rivaled by very many who have ever walked with God. He had success where Moses did not and a big part of that may have been that Moses' biggest trouble makers died in the wilderness but still... how did Joshua manage to become one of the most courageous leaders the Bible has ever seen?

It's in that last verse we read- did you catch it? God said to be strong and courageous because He would go everywhere with Joshua. The secret to courage is to keep our eyes focused squarely on God and what He has done for us and His people over the years. Only by doing that will you and I ever move into whatever future God has planned for us. Because make no mistake- God's plan for your future will require courage on your part. So... be strong and courageous. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Tuesday Reflection: Before Joshua ever takes the reins of Israel to lead them into their inheritance God makes sure to tell him what the secret to success is. Aren't you excited that God spells this out clearly? There are thousands of books (at least if not millions) where somebody claims to have discovered the secret of success. The problem with that is it's no secret. The Bible tells us over and over how to succeed and we'll start by looking at what God tells Joshua:

Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do.
Joshua 1:7-8 (NLT)

What book of instruction? Well, at this point the Bible consisted of 5 books- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy. The collective works of Moses. God tells Joshua to study His instructions given through Moses. To meditate on them day and night and God promises that if he does that then he will "prosper and succeed" in everything he does. How simple is that? Maybe not easy but simple. So why do we have such a struggle when it comes to success? Maybe Psalm chapter one will shed some light:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the LORD'S teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed.
Psalm 1:1-3 (NCV)

Did you catch it? King David lists three things that often keep us from being successful. These three things often lure us away not only from studying and meditating on God's instruction but also lure us into breaking those instructions. Have you ever been unsuccessful at making changes in your life? Yeah, me too. If you've ever struggled with addiction maybe you will recognize this pattern. When I decided I had to stop abusing drugs and alcohol because I realized they were now abusing me I tried lots of times to stop. Over and over I failed. Why? I wasn't sure but I finally decided if I was going to recover my life I had to go all in because what I had been doing wasn't working. I kept hanging out with the same people, going the same places I'd always gone, listening to the same people and things I'd always listened to and doing most of the same things I had always done.

So when I finally found "success" in recovery it was because I did what Psalm one told me to- I changed who I listened to, where I went and what I did. I also poured my life into God's instructions for life. I really thought about them for the first time. And do you know what happened? **SUCCESS!!!! GOD WAS RIGHT! GO FIGURE!** Now I don't say that to make fun of God but to point out how silly I had been. Thinking I knew better than God what would lead to success in my life.

How about you? Have you been unsuccessful at making changes in your own life? There could be many factors why but maybe it's time to perform the "Psalm One Test" on your life. Do you need to change who/what you listen to, where you go and what you do? It's funny how doing what God says will lead to success. Go figure.

Wednesday Reflection: So far we've learned from Joshua that courage isn't the absence of fear- it's the unwillingness to let my fear become my master. We've also learned that the secret to success is following the Leader- studying the Bible, thinking about what it says and then putting it into practice in my own life. The next thing we learn from Joshua is that sometimes following the leader is seems crazy.

After God gave Joshua His epic pep talk in chapter one, Joshua sends two scouts across the Jordan river to scope out the city of Jericho. Remember- this is the city that tripped up the people of Israel 40 years before. The 12 scouts Moses sent in came back convinced that they could never take the city or the land (well... to be fair only 10 of the scouts believed that- the other two (Joshua & Caleb) were ready to roll in there and claim their destinies). Now Joshua sends only two scouts in. Why only two? Maybe he'd learned it's tougher to work with a larger committee than it is a small one? Whatever the reason he sends in two scouts- we don't know their names. They make their way into the city of Jericho and stay the night with a woman name, Rahab. Now the Bible says Rahab was a prostitute. Scholars believe that means she would have had room to spare in her "house". The reality of Rahab's profession makes telling this story to a children's Sunday school class tricky. I'll never forget when I first started teaching the fourth and fifth graders at the church I would eventually work for first as a youth minister and then as pastor.

I had found a series of VHS tapes by Hanna-Barbera. They were cartoons bases on the great stories of the Bible. I was showing the video of Joshua and Jericho to the class one Sunday when they got around to talking about Rahab. As the narrator told us that, "Rahab was a..." I got very nervous. What is this guy going to say about Rahab? Am I ready to answer the

question about what a prostitute is? Am I ready to face angry parents when their child's answer to the question, "what did you learn about in Sunday school today?" was, prostitution? It turns out I needn't have worried. The narrator didn't skip a beat- he simply said, "Rahab was... an entertainer!"

Problem solved! Catastrophe averted! So back to our story. The spies are staying with Rahab and the king of Jericho hears there might be Israelite spies hiding within the city. He sends soldiers to Rahab's house and she hides the Israelite scouts and saves their lives. The scouts promise to spare her and her family when they take the city. They head back to the encampment and tell Joshua that the people of Jericho are terrified and it's ripe for the plucking. So God tells Joshua what's next:

Today I will begin to make you a great leader in the eyes of all the Israelites. They will know that I am with you, just as I was with Moses. Give this command to the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant: 'When you reach the banks of the Jordan River, take a few steps into the river and stop there.' Joshua 3:7 (NLT)

Notice God doesn't tell Joshua that He'll stop the water BEFORE the priests cross the Jordan. It will only stop AFTER they put their feet in. And did I mention the Jordan river was at flood stage at that point? This would have been a terrifying test for Joshua and especially the priest who were at the front of the line. Can you imagine laying out your plan to the Israelites and the priests? How will he convince them to buy into the plan. What happens if they resist the plan? What then? But Joshua trusts God and because of that the people and the priests trust Joshua:

As soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river's edge, the water above that point began backing up a great distance away at a town called Adam, which is near Zarethan. And the water below that point flowed on to the Dead Sea until the riverbed was dry. Then all the people crossed over near the town of Jericho. Meanwhile, the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Lord's Covenant stood on dry ground in the middle of the riverbed as the people passed by. They waited there until the whole nation of Israel had crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Joshua 3:15-17 (NLT)

And the people learn an important lesson- we should listen to God and to God's servant, Joshua. That is our secret to success. But now that they are on the other side of the Jordan what will happen? Their feet are walking on promised land at this point for the first time in over 440 years. Now things start to get very interesting. More tomorrow.

Thursday Reflection: Another lesson Joshua teaches us is that God intends for us to have our own stories. Joshua is taking over as the leader of God's people but it's not going to be easy to the guy who takes over after Moses. Moses had so many fantastic stories- the burning bush, the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea crossing, the 10 Commandments, etc., etc., etc. Now Joshua is ready to lead and God makes it pretty clear that His intention is that Joshua would compile his own list of great stories. First we see that when Israel crosses the Jordan river the water stops and Israel crosses over on dry land. And once the Israelites are on the eastern side of the Jordan, God gives Joshua another story to tell. Joshua leaves the camp

and goes out to scout the city of Jericho by himself. While he's out there all alone this happens:

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and demanded, "Are you friend or foe?" "Neither one," he replied. "I am the commander of the Lord's army." At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. "I am at your command," Joshua said. "What do you want your servant to do?" The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did as he was told. Joshua 5:3-15 (NLT)

So much to talk about in this one little snippet of scripture. First of all, let's talk about Who this commander is. I think it's pretty obvious it's Jesus. Some people disagree and believe it's an angel but let's look at that. There's a lot we don't know about angels but one thing we do know is, you're NEVER supposed to worship them. In fact, in the book of Revelation there's a moment when the apostle John encounters an angel and his first reaction is to bow:

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said, "No, don't worship me. I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters. Revelation 19:12 (NLT)

But when Joshua meets the commander of the Lord's army not only does he bow down in "reverence" which is the same word as "worship" but he even asks the commander to tell him what to do. What Joshua literally says to the commander is, "command me." And not only does the commander not correct Joshua and tell him to stand up and don't worship Him- He takes it one step further. The commander tells Joshua to, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."

Does that sound familiar to you? Maybe something that the angel of the Lord told Moses before it turned out it wasn't just an ordinary (if you can use that word in reference to angels) angel but actually God Himself. Now God gives Joshua a very similar story to tell and a very similar experience to live out in his own life. It's the stuff that makes choosing God's way and trusting that God knows what He's doing possible. The commander gives Joshua specific instructions on how God wants Israel to take the city of Jericho:

You and your fighting men should march around the town once a day for six days. Seven priests will walk ahead of the Ark, each carrying a ram's horn. On the seventh day you are to march around the town seven times, with the priests blowing the horns. When you hear the priests give one long blast on the rams' horns, have all the people shout as loud as they can. Then the walls of the town will collapse, and the people can charge straight into the town." Joshua 6:3-5 (NLT)

Pretty specific, huh? Have you ever thought about why God does things this way? Why doesn't He just have Joshua and the nation of Israel win the battle the old fashioned way? Through superior tactics and strength. Why all this marching around the city for 6 days and then 7 times on the seventh day? Maybe because this would be one of those stories that the people of Israel would tell their children for the rest of their history. And maybe because this battle isn't just about giving Israel a great story but it was also about teaching them to trust God. These tests that God gives His people are opportunities to become stronger. To forge a more fierce trust in our own hearts. When we hear God asking us to do something that

seems completely backwards and upside down and sure to fail because it makes no earthly sense and then we see God's plan succeed it does something within us. It gives us this faith that chooses God's way even when doing so proves to be beyond difficult.

Joshua and people of Israel did what God asked. And because of that on the seventh day when the priests blew their shofars and the people shouted as loud as they could the walls of Jericho came a tumblin' down. How about you? Is God asking you to do something that you have a hard time understanding? That maybe makes no sense? Maybe He's asking you to do something that just seems backwards and upside down. Maybe you've been hesitant to actually follow through and obey. Maybe today is a great day to take a page out of Joshua' book and do what God asks.

Friday Reflection: I always thought genealogies were boring.

Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; Zzzzzzzzzzzzz. Huh? What? Oh, sorry... I fell asleep. At least that's how I used to look at the genealogies of Jesus. But then I noticed in Matthew's genealogy there are four women mentioned (that was unheard of... nobody cared about the women in the ancient world... who cares what women were in the family tree... all that mattered were the men). For some reason God wanted to make sure we knew of at least four women in Jesus ancestry. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth & Bathsheba.

Now all four of those women have something in common. They all had questionable sexual exploits that they were involved in. Tamar tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her by pretending to be a prostitute and she got pregnant that way (her husband/husbands had all died before giving her a son and... well, go read the story... it's incredibly sad and messed up), Bathsheba was the woman King David committed adultery with and then tried to cover it up by arranging to have her husband killed, Ruth's story is a little tamer but still, there's some interesting stuff about her "uncovering" her future husband's "feet" before they even really started dating (go ahead... google what "uncovering the feet" was a euphemism for in ancient Hebrew), and Rahab was the former prostitute who married an Israelite after the battle of Jericho.

Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Matthew 1:5 (NLT)

All of them in Jesus' family tree. All of them ancestors of Jesus. All of them singled out in the Bible to make sure we remembered they were there in that incredibly dysfunctional family tree.

Why? Well, I'm guessing God wanted to make absolutely sure that we knew that there is nobody that is too far gone for Jesus to save them. And that Jesus' story was a story about the power of God to pick up the broken pieces of our lives and turn them into something brand new, something beautiful, something whole. He's the master at that as it turns out. He did it in the New Testament. He even did it in the Old Testament (just ask Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth & Rahab). And He's still doing it to this very day:

We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. Romans 3:21 (NLT)

I'll be the first to admit that there are some confusing things in the Bible. This scripture is not one of them. This is as simple as it gets. No matter who you are or what you've done- Jesus saves you when you trust Him. And then He gets busy making something beautiful out of your future no matter what's in your past. It doesn't mean the past goes away. It doesn't mean you won't have to deal with consequences from your past. But He will take the good, the bad and the ugly and mix it up and make something of it you never would have dreamed was possible. Just ask Rahab.