

God's Great Commission

Joshua 1:1-9

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

January 10, 2021

Friends, stay with me as I introduce the sermon. We cannot begin our time together without addressing the recent events in our nation and particularly at our nation's Capitol this past week.

These events: like the contentious political season of 2020, the controversial November election, the accusations of voter fraud, the lawsuits that were filed, the controversy over the electoral college count, a rally before the certification of the electoral college that concluded with a mob breaking into the Capitol, then the continued divisive rhetoric of both political parties in the aftermath of the Capitol incident reveal the shortcomings of our constitutional republic. Also, the divisive language of the mainstream media and people on social media put on display the lack of virtue of the citizens of our great nation.

Friends, as wonderful as the American Constitution is, it is still a flawed form of self-government. Its flaws have been on display since it was ratified in 1787. It allowed the despicable system of slavery to continue another 90 years before it was finally stopped by a Civil War. Then it allowed the civil rights of African Americans to be trampled on for another one hundred years with Jim Crow laws. While progress has been made to eliminate injustice, we still have a long way to go.

The good news is, as flawed as our system is, it is still the best form of self-government the world has ever seen. Even with its flaws, our government continues to self-correct. Often the correction is slow and painful and leaves us longing for something better because not enough correction was done or it over-corrected. This, my friends, is the shortcoming of sinful human governments and institutions.

What's my point? I have two points for my introduction: First, to exhort those in Grand Avenue Baptist Church to not follow the way of the world when it comes to politics. Brothers and sisters, beware of driving wedges in your relationships on social media. It is not worth it. Your clever posts will not solve the problem, but it could make it worse. As Proverbs 26:20-21 says:

*²⁰ For lack of wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.*

*²¹ As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.*

If you believe your social media posts will correct all that is wrong in our government, you are sadly mistaken. You will not be the next Thomas Payne or Ben Franklin. Those shoes are already filled. Sow seeds of peace on social media.

Here is my second and main point of my introduction: The shortcomings of human governments and institutions leave us longing for the righteous government of King Jesus. His government is a government that rules in the hearts of God's people right now. It is already here, but it is not yet fully realized. Let's live as a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

We are still in Joshua chapter one and, by God's providence, we are looking at a text that deals with the transition of leadership in the nation of Israel. Take your Bibles and turn back one page and look at Deuteronomy 34:9 and let's read about the transition of leadership in the nation of Israel:

And Joshua, the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.

This was a smooth transition of leadership for the nation of Israel. However, it was actually one of the few smooth transitions of power.

Eventually, in the nation of Israel, the flaws of sinful human leadership showed up. Then through the rest of the Old Testament, we learn that even the best of the kings and leaders failed to follow God completely. Eventually, sinful transfer of leadership after the death of King Solomon led to a civil war where Judah and Israel split into two nations. Finally, both nations were judged and were eventually destroyed.

You see, it is not just the flaws in our own government that leave us longing for King Jesus and His righteous rule. A close examination of the Old Testament leaves us longing for the righteous government of King Jesus.

However, for our time in Joshua, we will see a leader who exemplified probably better than anyone in the Old Testament, including Moses, what it means to fully trust and obey God and His promises. Joshua was a leader who led by holding fast to God's promises and obeyed His word.

Joshua 1:1-18 is God's great commission to Joshua and the people. Verses 1-9 are God's commission to Joshua and vv. 10-18 are Joshua commissioning the nation of Israel. This morning we will examine vv. 1-9, and next Sunday, Pastor Eric will lead us through vv. 10-18.

Verses 1-9 breakdown into two sections. Verses 1-5 reiterate God's promise to Joshua as he leads the people into the Promised Land. Then vv. 6-9 is God's charge for Joshua to respond to God's promise by being *strong and courageous* as he leads the people.

Here is the main point of vv. 1-9: *God commissions His leaders and His people to trust in the Greater Joshua and obey His word.* I only have two points this morning. Let's walk through vv. 1-9.

I. God's Great Commission: I Will Be With You (Joshua 1:1-5)

I want to give us three mental hooks to hang our thoughts as we work through these five verses. The Great Commission given to Joshua hangs on these three promises of God: (1) *the Promised Leader*; (2) *the Promised Land*; and (3) *the Promised Lord*.

First, let's look at the Promised Leader in vv. 1-2:

After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel.

Let's pause and think about what was going on in these verses. Remember, back in Deuteronomy 34, Moses had just died, but before he died, Moses laid his hands on Joshua to transfer leadership to him.

Joshua 1:1 & 2 connect the book of Joshua to God's story of Promise that began in the Pentateuch. God reminds us that the book of Joshua is the continuation of all that was promised to God's people back in Genesis.

Let's press pause for just a moment because we need to linger over these verses for just a bit. Look at what was going on in this text.

Think about it, since Exodus, Moses has been the main leader of Israel's unfolding story of redemption. He led them out of Egypt. He led them through the Red Sea. He led them to Mt. Sinai. He went up the mountain and received the Ten Commandments from God. In Leviticus, he gave the instructions for the Laws of God and the Tabernacle. In Numbers, he led them through the wilderness for forty years. He is the one who has been the mediator between God and His people. He has been the prophet giving the people the word of God. He led them to the appointed place where they are ready to cross over the Jordan River. He preached his last sermon that we know as Deuteronomy, and then he died. Quite honestly, this had to be a dark time for the people of Israel. He was the only leader this generation of Israelites had ever known. They had to be discouraged and disheartened.

Here is what was going on. They were standing on the east side of the Jordan River. They could see the Promised Land. However, the Jordan River, which is normally a small river, is now at flood stage.

When I say flood stage, I do not mean flood stage like the Skunk River at flood stage. It was more like the Des Moines River at flood stage in Ledges State Park, where there are tall ravines on both sides of the river.

At the place where Israel was on the Jordan River, there was a deep gorge. They had to travel down to the river to cross it, but now they could not. The river was upon the ledges on

both sides of the cliffs. The water rushing off the mountain was no small steam but a wall of water. Scholars tell us that it had to be a frightening sight to behold the river at this stage.

So, what do you do? Do you begin to doubt that God is still with you? Do you continue to trust God in the face of death? You think: *“God has done amazing miracles for us but He did not keep Moses alive?”* Do you trust Moses' assistant? Do you wait? Do you put your plans on hold? Do you mourn and have a funeral?

Here is what God told Joshua to do. Look in v. 2, *“Therefore arise and go over this, Jordan.”*

Wow! This is amazing when you think about it. What is God doing? He is teaching Joshua and Israel that His promises do not depend on a man. Moses may have died, but God's promises do not die. The word of God remains the same. God's promises are sure. The promises of God are more powerful than the raging river before you. Put your hope, confidence, and faith in God who controls the raging river and not in a man.

Think about what is going on here. When God's people are at their lowest, He takes the initiative to instill hope and confidence in His promises by commanding them to: *arise and cross over the Jordan River*. Although these commands are addressed to Joshua, they apply to all of Israel.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, take heart in your darkest times. His promises and His word do not depend on a man or a woman. Do not put your hope and confidence in flesh and blood. Put your hope in Christ. Specifically, hope in the embodiment of the Word of God, the Lord Jesus. He is God's promised leader for us. He is who we look to, and we do that by the Spirit of God, taking the word of God and reminding us of the promises of God in Christ. Jesus is the True Promised Leader—put your hope in Him alone.

I know many of you are worried about what kind of nation and world you will leave your children. Don't worry. God's people have been living in tumultuous political times. They have lived under dictators and tyrants since the beginning time. Yet, the gospel still goes forward.

So, what do you do? You train your children to look in faith to God's *Promised Leader—the Lord Jesus Christ*. Cultivate in them a love of God's word, and God will take care of them. Their existence and flourishing in like will not depend on you protecting them. God will care for you, little sparrows.

Next, in vv. 3-4, is the Promised Land. Look again at what God says to Joshua in vv. 3-4,

Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. ⁴ From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory.

What Yahweh does is remind Joshua and Israel of the promise He made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and now He makes it to Joshua. In their grief, God does not allow them to simply throw in the towel. He is not saying it is wrong to grieve or be sad that Moses is gone, but He is not allowing Joshua and the people to forget or stop pursuing the promise of God. They kept pursuing God's promise until they possessed it.

If you read the description of the Promised Land borders, you realize that they did not accomplish all of this in Joshua's time. It was not until King David and King Solomon's reign that they actually took full possession of the Promised Land. Yet, even then, they could not keep the Promised Land because of the sin of their kings.

The fact is neither Joshua nor any king that followed after him could give the nation of Israel the rest that was promised in the boundaries of the Promised Land.

This is because the True Inheritance of the Promised Land would only come in Christ. The True Promised Land is where Jesus rules and reigns in righteousness. The True Promised Land is where the people of God enjoy the inheritance of rest in God. The True Promised Land is to be with Jesus in the new heavens and the new earth when all have been restored. This is a land that we still look to and long for in life. One day we will receive that inheritance.

Finally, in v. 5, we see the Promised Lord.

*No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life.
Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you
or forsake you.*

Let's breakdown the promise in v. 5. First, we learn that God assured Joshua and Israel that just as God was with *Moses, so He will be with Joshua*. This is the promise of the presence of God in the life of Joshua.

This is an old promise that was made to Abraham in Genesis 15:1:

*"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very
great."*

The promise of the presence of God in the lives of His people really is a precious promise. It is a magnificent promise that we should not take for granted.

The gospel-fact is that for us to enjoy the presence of God in our lives meant that Jesus had to lose the presence of God in His life. On the cross, Jesus was forsaken and lost the presence of God so that God's promise of His presence in our lives would be fulfilled.

Next, we see that promise to Joshua that says,

No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life.

This promise is made to Joshua for the specific task of leading the people into the Promised Land.

Here is what you need to know about this promise. It is not to be used as a promise to take any land or anything you want.

The fact is, this promise has been misused by people and nations throughout history to justify the taking of the land of other people, tribes, and nations. This particular promise is only for Joshua and Israel at that particular time.

Remember, Joshua and the people of Israel were not going into land that was uninhabited. They were going into land, and they were going to violently dispossess the people that were in the land.

The commission of Joshua and the people of Israel was to fulfill a promise/prophecy God made to them 400 years earlier. This promise stated that God would judge the Amorites for their sin, but at that time, their sins were not yet complete.

Now, it is 400 years later, and it was time for God's judgment on the Amorites and the tribes of Canaan. The judgment that was coming on them was coming through Joshua leading the nation of Israel.

Friends, a lot of damage has been done in the name of texts like this one. Nations that wanted land dispossessed people in the name of progress and destiny is simply wicked. Friends, it is dangerous to weaponize the promises of God for your own selfish purposes. Beware of treating God's word that way.

Let me just say one more time, the promise of, "*No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life,*" was a promise made to Joshua at that time for the specific purpose of taking the Promised Land.

And no man did. God's word to Joshua was good. The ultimate fulfillment of this word for us is heard in Romans 8:31, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" This word has to do with your salvation. As impossible as it is for sinners like us to be saved, because of the promise of God—He is the One who ensures our salvation. If God is for us in our salvation, who can be against us?

Finally, look at the last part of the promise in v. 5 is for all of God's people for all time. It says,

I will not leave you or forsake you.

This is the promise of God's presence with His people. This is a promise that God gives to His people over and over in Scripture.

God's words here are echoed by Jesus when He gave the Great Commission to His disciples just before He ascended into Heaven in Matthew 28:18-20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

In this text, the Greater Joshua applies the promise of Yahweh made to Joshua and applied it to His disciples to commission them to take the good news of salvation to the nations.

This commission and promise are for us. Even now, the Greater Joshua commissions us and sends us to make disciples. He commissions us to leave our safe spaces and go into all the world with the promise of the salvation in Christ. Friends, the Great Commission is not about land, nations, or power but the salvation of souls from the coming judgment of the wrath of God upon people for their sin against Him. Friends, we must arise and go.

Brothers and sisters, God's presence is with us as we *suffer to take the gospel forward*. Listen to how the Apostle Paul unpacked the promise of God's presence in Romans 8:31-39:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Brothers and sisters, God's promises did not die with Jesus. They are real, and they are alive in the risen Christ. So, when you are standing at some raging river in your life, you need to know you can trust the Greater Joshua to lead you through the river and safely to the other side.

The question is: Will you trust Him to lead? This takes us to our second point.

II. God's Great Commission: Be Strong & Courageous (Joshua 1:6-9)

In vv. 1-5, we saw God's commission to Joshua and vicariously to the people of Israel. Now in vv. 6-9, we see that God's people are called to trust and obey the promise of God. Let's reread vv. 6-9:

Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷ Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. ⁸ This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous.

*Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your
God is with you wherever you go.*

In light of God's Great Commission to the people, the people are called to respond. We are always called to respond to the message and work of God in our lives.

At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses called the people to respond to his message. Now at the beginning of Joshua, the people are called to respond to God's charge one more time. At the end of Joshua, they will be called to respond one more time. The response of the people is the application of vv. 1-5.

What is the response called for in vv. 6-9? Here they are: (1) *trust God's promise*, (2) *meditate on God's promise*, and (3) *obey God's promise*. Let's unpack these three exhortations.

First: we are to *trust* God's promise. Three times in vv. 6-9, Yahweh calls Joshua, and through his leadership, the people of Israel to *be strong and courageous*. If you remember, I told you last Sunday that this phrase is an Old Testament way of calling God's people to trust God's word and obey God's word.

There is sometimes a misunderstanding of the phrase: *be strong and courageous*. Some mistakenly think that because this exhortation is given in a military context, it means that Joshua and the warriors were to get tough and get going. They were to get some military basic training in order to fight the battles that lie ahead. The men needed to get in shape, learn how to fight, shoot a bow, and wield a sword. In short, they needed to be the next Arnold Schwarzenegger of the military.

This is not even close to what Yahweh called Joshua to do. God was calling Joshua and the people to basic training, but it was not military basic training. Instead, it was spiritual basic training. They needed to learn what it meant to trust and obey God's word. They needed to learn what it meant to live by faith in God.

There is no doubt they would need physical stamina. But Joshua was to trust his physical condition and spiritual condition into the hands of God. There were going to be long nights, long days, lots of walking, sore feet, blood, sweat, tears, shields, swords, javelins, horses, chariots, diseases, and death everywhere. Yet, God's people were to trust Almighty God who fulfills His promises. He would sustain them in the battle.

As a matter of fact, this is what is required for the gospel to go forward today. We will have to do hard things by faith in God, not in our own strength. We will have to be willing to risk comfort, safety, and security for the spread of the gospel. Sometimes the people of God give their lives for the spread of the gospel, but that does not mean their faith was weak or that the promises of God have failed. It means that their suffering has become a witness to the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May the Lord Jesus grant us strength and courage to follow Him into these spiritual battlegrounds.

Our second exhortation is to *meditate* on God's promises. Listen to vv. 7-8 one more time:

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. ⁸ This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

There is a lot in these two verses, but I think the heart of these verses are found in the phrase in v. 8,

You shall meditate on it [the word of God] day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.

Joshua was to trust God's word and obey God's word, but in order to do that, he needed to know God's word. He was going to have to meditate on God and the promise that God had given him in order to lead the people of God. He was going to have to chew on God's word. Digest God's word so that it became part of who he was.

In turn, the people would catch their faith through Joshua's life and faith. He was the new prophet of God who gave them God's word, and then they would meditate on the word of God they received from him.

The Hebrew word *meditate* means to mutter, growl, and self-talk. Essentially, God's word and God's promise was to be what he continually thought about and preached to himself every day. It was to *NOT depart from his mouth*.

Meditation on God's word here is like spending time alone with God, but it is also more than that. The word also carries a corporate idea of meditation. Joshua's challenge was to get God and His word at the center of his life and then corporately at the center of the people's lives.

This is the challenge of leadership even today. How do we, as leaders, get the word of God to be the center of the life of our church?

First, we encourage people to spend time alone with God. We exhort people to read the Bible every day, pray every day, and meditate on God's word every day. We encourage people to know the gospel so well that they can apply the gospel to all of their lives. Preaching the gospel to ourselves leads us to repent of sin and to gospel-transformation through the application of the atonement of Christ.

Also, corporately we meditate on the word of God when we read God's word and sing God's word together. When we do this, we are murmuring the word of God together, and it helps us, as a church body, to corporately put the word of God at the center of our lives.

Yahweh uses two Hebrew words to describe what will happen if Joshua remains faithful to God and His word. He will *prosper and be successful*.

To *prosper* does not mean prosperity as in wealth but to thrive and flourish in life. It is a word closely associated with *rest* that is given in the Promised Land.

To *succeed* actually means *succeed*, but it was success that was defined by obedience to God's word in the task that was given to Joshua. It means that if Joshua trusted God's promise and meditated on God's word, he would successfully accomplish all God had set for him to do. This was a conditional promise set only for this specific task.

Joshua, was like Jesus, in that His obedience to God would result in him being the author and perfecter of their faith. In other words, as Joshua endeavored to obey God and lead the people as they would prosper. His obedience spilled over onto the people of God.

Likewise, Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of our faith in God, but His obedience does not simply spillover. Instead, His obedience fills us with His Holy Spirit. His obedience to God's word, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead makes our obedience possible. It is the atonement of Christ that purchased our desire and ability to obey the word of God.

This leads me to the final exhortation in vv. 6-9: *Obey the promises of God*. Church be strong and courageous. Meditate on the promises of God that are found in the gospel of Jesus Christ and then act in obedience to the gospel.

Friend, you may be here this morning, and you have never trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior; you need to know that there is no way you will cross the raging river of death and inherit eternal life in your own power of obedience, strength, efforts, or righteousness. The water is too fast, too dark, and too deep. It is hopeless unless you put your faith in the One who stepped in the river and stopped it from flowing.

Jesus has gone across the river for you. He died in your place and for your sin. He has blazed the trail to God for you. All you need to do is turn from your sin and trust Jesus Christ, the True and Greater Joshua.

Brother and sister in Christ, what I have been preaching to you this morning is nothing new. As a matter of fact, as I prepared the message, I was saying to myself, "*Lord God, I have said these things over and over. Everything I read in your word keeps pointing me back to You and Your word. It keeps driving me deeper into the heart of the gospel. Lord, please take this simple message and equip Your people.*"

Friends, this first chapter of Joshua is basic training for us. It prepares us for the spiritual battles that are before us. The Christian life is NOT lifting weights, pumping iron, doing physical

workouts, not that there is anything wrong with that. It is, however, faithfulness to God in all that life brings.

Think about it this way, when you stand at the open casket of a loved one, there is a spiritual battle going on right then. Will you believe the promises of God or will you abandon God's word? When you receive the diagnosis that it is cancer, will you murmur God's promises to yourself, or will you murmur against God? When you lose your job or lose your retirement because of an economic downturn, will you believe that God has planned for you to prosper in Him and, by faith, invest in God's word and believe that He has not left you or forsaken you or will you be frightened and dismayed?

Brother and sister, these experiences in life and many others I do not have time to mention will feel like the raging waters at the Jordan River, and you will wonder if God has forsaken you. Dear brothers and sisters, He will never leave you or forsake you. He is with you wherever you go.