

## "A New Year's Promise"

It had been one heck of a year! Actually, the last *40 years* had been horrible in many ways! The Israelites spent that time trying to survive in a desert. Remember, they had been freed from slavery in Egypt. God was with them, sometimes in supernatural ways. But they kept shooting themselves in the foot: complaining to God, ungrateful, flaunting God's commands, doubting God at every turn. As a result just about that whole generation died there in the wilderness.

Now, their dynamic leader, Moses is dead. Joshua 1:2 tells us, "Moses my servant is dead." Even though they gave Moses fits with their hardness of heart and unbelief, the Israelites still depended on him. He was their rock. He was the constant in all their years of wandering in the wilderness, waiting to enter the promised land. Without Moses' strong leadership, how were they going to manage?

2020 has been one heck of a year for us, right? Just about everything has been touched and changed by COVID-19. While we haven't lost a Moses, we've lost a lot of things: normal social gatherings (family picnics, birthday celebrations, eating in restaurants), visiting friends and family members who are in the hospital or a nursing care facility. Some have cancelled their vacations (Nancy and I cancelled our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary October cruise to New England and Canada), funerals have been postponed, or scaled down, many have lost their businesses or jobs or income. Things we just took for granted have been taken from us: a hug or handshake, singing in church, going to the movies or a show, going to the grocery store and not worrying about there not being any toilet paper on the shelf! Our "promised land" I suppose is just being able to live without dealing with COVID.

Moses has died, and for the Israelites, the future looks dark and uncertain. But God comes to His people with words of encouragement and hope. And God comes to us with these same words of encouragement and hope in this difficult and uncertain time.

***First of all, God has already picked a new leader, a successor to Moses. He is Joshua.***

God speaks to Joshua. He says, "Get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I'm going to give you" (Joshua 1:2). Ok, God says, let's look ahead now to the future. This time of year, as the year ends, it's normal to think about the New Year and what it will bring. We're certainly hoping for a better year than 2020! Our hopes are buoyed by the availability now of a vaccine. But a new year is always filled with uncertainties. This year has reminded us of how fragile life can be, how unpredictable, how vulnerable we are as humans.

So what does God say to Joshua, and to us? First of all, God says, *I will be with you*. "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" (Joshua 1:5). As God was with Moses, God will be with Joshua. *"I will never leave you nor forsake you."* Do those words ring a bell? Jesus' last words before He ascended back to the Father (according to Matthew) are these: "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus is speaking these words to His *followers*. He will be with them *always*.

As we face a new year, with its uncertainties, let's be realistic about what God promises. He doesn't promise material prosperity (in spite of what the prosperity gospel TV preachers may tell us). He doesn't promise that we won't get sick (illness is a part of living in this fallen world). He does not promise absence of grief, or disappointment (this happens to everyone). Neither does He promise immunity from problems and difficulties (Jesus clearly told us that in this world we will have troubles and tribulation). *But God promises to be with us – through whatever comes!*

Isaiah 43 is a tremendous passage that also talks about the Lord being with His people. "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord you God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:1-3a). Notice, God doesn't say we won't go through deep waters, or the fire of trials. But He will be there to protect us. Often it helps to have someone with us when we go through difficult times – a family member, a friend - so we're not alone. Who better than the Lord Jesus to be by our side!

God promises to be with Joshua, as He was with Moses. He also tells Joshua: ***Be strong and courageous.*** He says it more than once! In verse 6 God says, "Be strong and courageous." In the next verse, verse 7: "Be strong and very courageous." In verse 9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous." I mean, do you think God was telling Joshua to be strong and courageous?

Fear is something we all experience. When we think about what may lie ahead in the future, it's easy to let fear and anxiety get the upper hand. What would be your worst fear as you face this new year? The thing you are most afraid of, or anxious about? Health? Safety? A relationship? Money worries? No doubt, there can be things that are really intimidating, scary. But isn't it true, we have tendency to *magnify* those fears the more we focus on them. It's kind of like, did you ever lose a cavity and have a hole in your tooth. As you press your tongue against it, it seems like a huge hole (you could almost climb in it). But it isn't really that big. (I lost part of a tooth some weeks ago, so I've got this big hole by what's left of that tooth. I'm just waiting things out, as this tooth is on its way to tooth heaven!).

The thing you fear or worry about, it may seem humongous. But remember this: whatever it is, *God is bigger than that!* God told Joshua, "Be strong and courageous!" That's what He says to you, and me.

*God wants us to go into this New Year bold and confident! Unafraid!* You say, "Harry, that's easy to say, but that's only talk. Maybe so, but have you ever checked the number of times God says, "Don't be afraid"? He said it to young Joshua: "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). How many times did Jesus say that to His disciples and people He met! You say, "Yeah, but I'm a worrier." Or, "Anxiety is one of my issues." I get it! *But we don't have to be stuck there!*

One of my favorite Scripture passages is Isaiah 40:28-31: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to *those who have* no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the LORD shall renew *their* strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Notice, God offers His power in our weakness, to those who "wait upon the Lord." *God's power is available to us, if we take time each day to wait upon the Lord, and invite Him to be part of all that we do.*

This is reinforced by something else God says to Joshua. God says, ""Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 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 prosper and be successful" (Joshua 1:7-8). God promises to be with Joshua, to guide him and strengthen him and give him success. That's *God's part*. But in order to be blessed in this way, Joshua has to honor God and obey God. He's to meditate on the Law day and night, as it shows him how to live.

God promises to be with us, to give us His guidance and strength for whatever life may throw at us. *But we have to do our part*. Throughout Scripture, there are two components that always come into play in our relationship with God. First, God reaches out to us. God takes the initiative, and invites us into a relationship with Himself. We don't deserve it, but God offers it. This is called *grace*. But we need to respond, to surrender ourselves to God's will, to seek God, to obey His laws and commands. This is called *faith*. Joshua only had the Law – the commands God had given Israel – to meditate on. We've got all of that, and we also have the life and teachings of Jesus as our guide to follow. *To put it another way, God promises to be with us, but we've got to want to be with Him!*

You and I *can be* bold and unafraid as we enter a New Year. We can trust God to provide all we need. I'm thinking of some other words of Jesus: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life ...therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:25-27, 31-33).

Jesus says don't worry about tomorrow, and what it brings. God will provide what we need. But...to get to that place, we need to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. Seek God and His will. Seek first of all a right relationship with God. Seek to develop our spiritual life first,

and God will provide all our material needs.

Let's hope and pray 2021 is a better year for everyone, for our nation, for the world. But whatever comes, we've got the promises of God on which to rest and rely.

A couple of gospel songs come to mind, as they relate to our trusting God for the future. One gospel song has in it these words, "I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future, it's a secret, known only to Him."

And, the chorus of the song "I Know Who Holds Tomorrow" says this,

"Many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand,  
But I know who holds tomorrow, and I know He holds my hand."

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