

“Lessons From Joshua’s Journey”
Joshua 1
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June 11, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

It's especially an honor to share God's Word during this critical season in the life of Briarwood. I love this church. I work with Walk through the Bible and we have ministry in 140 countries. While I haven't been to all of those personally, there's a lot of travel involved. Two and a half million miles on Delta will confirm that. It was so glamorous my first flight, now they're just school busses with wings, that's all those airplanes are. When you live a lifestyle like that, where do you put down roots? I cannot tell you how many times I've tuned in online to Briarwood's services. Your pastor, Harry Reeder, in many ways has been my pastor and I not only love your church, I loved your pastor.

A coincidence is sometimes a miracle where God chooses to remain anonymous. So you can interpret it how you will but I think you all had a cancellation for a mission speaker and you were in desperate shape and Tom Bradford, who's been a friend for years and a partner of Walk through the Bible, must have told somebody here, “I know a guy, we've never heard of him but trust me, Harry, It'll be all right.” For the first time a decade or so ago, I met your pastor and it's a strange thing as a pastor to open up your church for there's a responsibility there to turn this sacred pulpit over to a guest. I didn't have much choice the first time because you were desperate for a speaker, a last minute fill in but then the invitations that have come through the years Harry has been a special encourager to me. He would simply say things like, ‘I like the way you handle the Word’ which is pretty amazing because Harry is like twice as smart as I am. He says ‘But you have a respect for Scriptures. You stick close to the Word.’ He also said to me ‘I also like that you don't preach too short because that would make me look terrible the next week when I came back.’ So we have that bond.

Harry not only encouraged me, but he challenged me. I would say he befriended me. He loved me and so I join you in your grief. We were not able to be here for the memorial service for Harry so we watched it online and it was a glorious celebration, a beautiful homegoing. We actually watched the full service twice, and I've probably watched the family's tributes to their dad and brother probably five times now. In fact, I've taken thorough notes and I asked my wife Ellen, “Do you think our kids would mind someday just reading what Jennifer, Ike and Abby said about their dad?” Abby, I'm so glad you didn't pass up that opportunity you brought. You can run anchor in my relay any day. We're all still grieving.

Something unique happened at that service, by the way, I'll never forget Ike saying, ‘You have lost your pastor, a friend, in some ways a spiritual father to many of you’ and I thought, he was going to say next, ‘you take your loss and you can multiply it times 100 and that's what we're experiencing as a family.’ Wouldn't have been wrong to say that for I've heard statements like that before, but Ike said “we as a family invite you into our grief because you're hurting on a level that parallels ours.” I've never heard an adult child make a statement like that. It's a unique relationship that's existed here between not only Pastor Reeder, but his entire family and this congregation.

Grief is hard work. Earl Grollman, who's a rabbi, is apparently an expert on grief. Can you be an expert on grief? I guess that's what he is. He doesn't share our view of Jesus as His Messiah. I hope that can still happen for him but all truth is God's truth and so much of what he writes is just so Scriptural. He said “Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is

an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity. It is the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.” There are some believers, in fact, some branches of the Tree of Faith have misunderstood God's Word. It's bad enough when the Scripture is misapplied, like in our first church, a little country church in a town of 850 people in Illinois near the Indiana line, and there was somewhat of a baby boom, that church would all fit in your choir loft. There were 12 babies born in our first year that the nursery had to be redone. Some women came to me and they said, ‘Pastor, how would you feel? We think we found an appropriate verse. What if we painted above the cribs, ‘We shall not all sleep, but we should all be changed’?

It's bad enough to just misapply God's Word, but it's even worse to just misquote the Scriptures. I have heard well-meaning people take I Thessalonians 4:13 and misquote it and say, we don't grieve because we have hope. My friends, that is not what that passage says. It says *[13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* It says we grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

God and I had to negotiate about this message. He led me to Joshua 1 pretty early as I began preparing for my time here, and I argued with Him because this passage begins to look at the theme of transition. I thought, ‘Lord, it's too soon. It's still time to grieve.’ But I believe that it is true that it is possible to still deeply grieve and also ask the question “now what happens next” that those are not mutually exclusive. Do not misunderstand me. I know we don't know each other well. I am not trying to hurry the process of your grief. I cringe whenever I hear the stages of grief. Yes, there's insight in those, but your grief experience is as unique as your fingerprint or your DNA. Please don't be one of those well-meaning Christ followers who takes those stages of grief and tries to overlay them on another person's experience. “I think she's still in denial. We got to get her unstuck, even if it means she for a few days moves into anger. That's a healthy thing. Eventually...” Don't script someone else's grief experience.

In fact, I want to encourage you; Don't script your own experience. Don't put yourself on the clock. I hope you realize the rest of the Briarwood staff are a gifted team, they're Godly leaders. They are postponing their personal processing of their grief to be strong for you. I understand this. I'm the family pastor. I led my sister's funeral. She died on my 50th birthday from complications from the adult form of muscular dystrophy. I did my mother's funeral. My dad remarried. I did my father's funeral and then my step mom's funeral. I get that. My wife, Ellen would say to me repeatedly, ‘You're not giving yourself space to grieve.’ “I'm fine.” Your staff is not fine and they're going to at some point, when it's appropriate, you're going to have to force them to get some time away because they're so committed to your health that they can neglect their own. That's extra for it's not even in my notes.

I want to share with you today seven principles about transition from Joshua 1. There's not very many transitions in the storyline of the Bible that go well. You see it in relay races. How many times has the U.S. had the four fastest sprinters in the four by 100 relay and we have not won the gold medal. Why? It's always on the exchange of the baton. It's the same way in the Word of God. There's not many great transitions. This is arguably the best transition in all of Scripture and so we are wise to look at it and learn from it. I realize some of what I will present to you today is that it's not time for it yet. This is going to be a process, a long process, but I don't know when or if I'll ever get invited back here, now that my friend Harry is gone, this may be the last time I ever get to speak to you.

Let's begin the story. Joshua 1:1-2 says, *[1] 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. There is a directness and abruptness here that almost seems blunt and inappropriate. Moses is gone, now what happens next? This was a different situation because Joshua had been nurtured by Moses for this role for a long time.

We don't know at Briarwood who Joshua (the next senior pastor) is going to turn out to be. It's going to be a process. There's a good chance there'll be an interim as oftentimes as best after a long term pastor. Let me just assure you, I am not the Joshua in this story. I'm neither a candidate nor the son of a candidate. I don't have the qualifications. I don't have the gift mix and I also have a Medicare card so I'm a little too old for what you need to find. But there's a bluntness here and this is where I argued with God, because I'm thinking how is Cindy (Harry's widow) going to respond if I preach on this passage or Jennifer, Ike, Abby, (Harry's children), the grandkids? It just seems insensitive and through ways God just confirmed that I needed to trust Him on this – just teach the Word.

So this is the first of our seven principles is in Joshua 1:1-2. Simply put; leadership transitions are inevitable and part of God's plan. At some point, even if the events of May 18th had not unfolded as they did, you would go through a leadership transition here. They're inevitable. This church has been so blessed – a 40-year founding pastor, 24 years with the second pastor but a transition would come at some point. God's agenda is so vast, it's like a ball of string that's stretched out all the way here and somewhere on that eternal string is this little point in time that's been the last 24 years where Dr. Reeder has been your pastor. But in the scope of eternity, it's been like that.

This reality reminds us that we are all finite. God alone is infinite. It's a hard but simple truth that should humble us and lead us to worship. It's never about a person. It's about God Himself. There's a lot of pressure on Joshua, a lot of burden and so God gives him a promise as we see in the next few verses. Joshua 1:3-5 says [3] *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.* [5] *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.*

The second principle here is leaders will come and leaders will go but God does not change. People are the variable. God is the constant. When we first moved from pastoring in Illinois to Atlanta, a dear friend John Hoover who wrote the Daily Walk Bible devotionals that are in the Daily Walk Bible. John was being freed up to build Walk Through the Bible internationally and I was going to lead the U.S. faculty and the men and women who teach for us do their recruiting and training and coaching. John says to me, “there's always a lot of change that walk through the Bible. There's always a new idea. You better get used to that.” In fact we happened to be in the break room and he hit one of the vending machines. He goes on to say “You ought to expect change every place from that vending machine right there. It's the only place you won't get change.” I've never forgotten that from over 30 years ago.

Hebrews 13:8 says [8] *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* He's the constant. Human leaders come and go. This is true not only because Jesus chooses not to change it is in fact because it's His nature, His core character, that doesn't allow Him to change. If I were Harry Reeder, I would introduce you to the word immutability. I just don't normally use words with that many syllables but it means unchanging and not only doesn't change, but cannot change because He would cease to be God if He did. The story of Joshua continues.

Joshua 1:6 says [6] *Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them.* By the way, considering that we don't know who Joshua is I think that's a wonderful thing because the question of who in the world is going to replace Harry Reeder is the wrong question. Nobody's going to replace Harry Reeder. If you put that on a new person, you're almost dooming them to fail. The answer is we are all Joshua. So, these verses are to you, be strong and courageous. The passage continues. Joshua 1:7 says [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.* There's a truth tucked in here. This may be less obvious than some of them at first, but it's so important.

The third principle here is that every visionary leader leave some things unfinished. It's probably true of every leader, but I'll guarantee you that Harry Reeder was not one of those who said 'I'm just sort of them out of ideas. I'm not sure what I should even talk about next Sunday.' That was not your pastor. I was in his office this morning praying with some staff and elders and it's such a beautiful thing that you always do with guest speakers. Outside of his office by the receptionists is this calendar and I am tired after reading the calendar, not the church calendar for that's down the wall a little bit. This is Harry's calendar. His calendar was not blank after May 18th. There were big commitments on it and I'll guarantee you he knew the rest of his teaching themes, major series for the rest of the year. Not only that, he had books that won't be written. He had a stack of books that he was looking forward to reading. There were probably some battlefields he had not yet been to, though I find that somewhat hard to believe. On this calendar were names and faces of some of you that he wanted to call, that he planned to send a note to. He had people that he observed leadership in and wanted to leverage their giftedness more at Briarwood.

Every visionary leader leaves some things undone. This is true not simply because time runs out. This is also true because just as much as God sovereignly gifts us, God also sovereignly limits every one of us. Why? Because if anybody had all the gifts, we wouldn't even want to be around them and that would be fine with them because they'd have no need of other people. In fact, they probably wouldn't even think they needed God. So God sovereignly gifts, but He also sovereignly limits every one of His followers. He left some things unfinished. You know, your pastor never referred to Briarwood as his church. I heard him correct people on that. The second time I came here to the conference, somebody asked me, "Where are you going this weekend?" I said, 'Over to Birmingham, to Briarwood.' He says, "Oh, Harry Reeder's Church." I said, 'You better not let Harry hear you say that.' This is Jesus Christ's Church and Harry said, "I am blessed to get to serve at His church, the local expression of it called Briarwood." That's so wise and tragically rare among mega-church senior pastors.

God gave Joshua clear instructions on what he had to do to be successful. Perhaps the most familiar verses from this passage is Joshua 1:8 that says [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.* It doesn't say 'be careful to know' but to do all that is written in it. Not so, if you're ever on Jeopardy and there's a category called the Bible. This is one of my recurring nightmares; to get on Jeopardy and the final Jeopardy category is the Bible and I would choke and not only lose the money, I would now be unemployed at Walk Through the Bible. That's not why we study not even for an entrance exam at heaven or so that our accommodations might be larger. It's because we need this book to navigate this life. It's not just to know it for

that's a means to an end. It's so we can live it. The passage continues. Joshua 1:9 says *[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.* Here is overwhelming responsibility and so God gives an unshakable promise.

The principal here is every leader is called to model both learning and living God's Word. Your pastor was a student of the Scriptures. He had this rare gift. You could come from very little religious background, and when he said something you would think "Wow, that makes sense." I went to a Christian college and then on to seminary, some other study after that, and he had this gift to turn the passage just a 16th of a turn so the light bounced off it a little differently. And I'm like, 'Wow, I never saw that before.' That's not something that only belongs to a senior pastor or even staff or even just the members of the session. We're all Joshua. We need to both learn and live God's Word.

Joshua 1:10-15 says *[10] And Joshua commanded the officers of the people, [11] "Pass through the midst of the camp and command the people, 'Prepare your provisions, for within three days you are to pass over this Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.'"*

[12] And to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, [13] "Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, 'The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.' [14] Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan, but all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers and shall help them, [15] until the LORD gives rest to your brothers as he has to you, and they also take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. Then you shall return to the land of your possession and shall possess it, the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you beyond the Jordan toward the sunrise." Are you kidding me? This is no gentle transition here. Within three days it's go time. They had been here 40 years ago, but because of their unbelief, they had failed to cross the land and as a result, for four decades, they wander in the wilderness and an entire generation, with a few exceptions, dies off. Here they are again on the edge of the Jordan River.

When I became pastor, first time ever, I can remember more than one person told me in various versions, said, "Go slow, stay low, don't blow, don't be afraid to say, I don't know." Then after I'd been in this church for a couple of years and there had been relative harmony but no momentum, somebody says, 'Oh, Phil, you wasted your honeymoon. Don't waste your honeymoon.' I said, "Where were you when I crossed this other stuff and hung it on the wall of my mind?" There's probably some balance between those two statements, but Joshua says, 'It's go time, let's go.' Again, there's a lot of detail in here, but he says to two and a half of the tribes their inheritance was on the side of the Jordan that they were currently on. They didn't need to cross the river to go into their inheritance. Can't you imagine them saying "brothers as you go to battle, we will pray for you." That wasn't the deal with Moses. Moses said, 'This can be your homeland, but until everybody's at peace, nobody's at peace. So your wives, your kids, they can stay here but if you're able, you have to cross over the Jordan with your brothers. Go fight for their land before you enjoy your land.' Wow!

So, when Joshua remembers what Moses says and reminds them, I'm sure they were hoping he had forgotten that. In fact, they actually obey that and do that and in these verses he gives the details of that and it's especially important when we're talking about facing a challenge where there's been previous failure. The principle is this; every new leader must focus on

unifying the people and preparing them for the future. I'm going to tiptoe up to that edge of wherever teaching the Word stops and meddling begins and I want to encourage you here as well. Do not delay the pursuit of unity until a leader comes. Make it a priority now for a new leader. I've never pastored a church the size of Briarwood, but you're just trying to remember people's names. You're just trying to reconstruct the story of the history. You don't know the nuances of what's going on. Do not dump the reconciliation that needs to take place during this time of transition. Do not delay and delegate that to the next person who comes. Part of the preparation, part of you playing your role as Joshua is to prioritize unity right now.

This idea that we can still be deep in grief and we also need to think about the future. You just saw one example of it today and you heard about a second one of it. You saw the one when these new members came forward. I thanked every one of them that I could personally get to. Are you not encouraged by that? Do you know how many people in our country who have a consumer mindset when it comes to church – will this church meet my needs – do you know how many people would say, “I'm just going to hang back and wait and see who the next leader is”? You ought to find every one of these new members and say thank you, because they're saying, ‘I'm excited about the future of Briarwood’ and you may say, ‘that's because they're new and they're not grieving’ and they're not in most cases, but God has sent them to encourage those of you who have been here the very longest.

Something else happened this week – VBS, vacation Bible school. I've had some conversations with some folks involved in that who were saying ‘Should we even have it? Should we cancel it?’ Let Harry get word that to honor him, you've canceled the opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer the gift of eternal salvation to hundreds of children. I know he wouldn't want you to do that. I can just see it the first day where the doors open and the kids bust through the doors. Kids process things differently than adults. Praise God and there was laughter and it was noisy in this place and that wasn't irreverent. That was part of the building of your pastor's legacy. None of that was in my notes, but I'm going to blame it on the Spirit of God.

Joshua 1:16-17 says [16] *And they answered Joshua, “All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. [17] **Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you.** Only may the LORD your God be with you, as he was with Moses!* Don't we as people have selective memories. I'm not sure Moses remembered it that way and Joshua was around for a lot of that, like when Aaron constructed the golden calf, when Moses' own sister led a rebellion. So appreciate the sentiment behind this, but not exactly historically accurate. Joshua 1:18 says [18] *Whoever rebels against your commandment and disobeys your words, whatever you command him, shall be put to death. Only be strong and courageous.* Now, those of you who have just joined the church and you heard part of your vow was to submit to discipline, I will encourage and assure you that this is not normative, this if you rebel, you will be put to death. We're not doing that for this was a unique time in history.

What's the lesson here? Transition in leadership requires a transfer of loyalty. And that's hard to do, especially when you've been served faithfully by a leader for so long. You ought to be pretty good at that here at Briarwood, especially those of you who have been here for a long time. I mean, Frank Barker, founding pastor, led for 40 years, and then he stayed when Harry became pastor. So, I will assure you that is a recipe for total disaster in the vast majority of churches. I asked Harry about that one time, and this is almost word for word, he said “Frank did absolutely everything he could to help me succeed as the pastor of this church.” It's beautiful.

Transition in leadership requires a transfer of loyalty that is not being disloyal to the past leader. It is, in fact, a tribute to that leader.

One more lesson and it's not in Joshua 1. We're not going to look at the passages but Joshua chapters 3 through 6 records, two big events; one, the crossing of the Jordan, and secondly, the conquering of Jericho. These two together teach us this principle; God will both affirm and test every new leader. What do I mean by that? Here they are up at the Jordan again. They failed miserably four decades ago, and this time they succeed. If you take the account of the crossing of Jericho and the crossing of the Red Sea under Moses' leadership, there's great parallels. There's repeated phrases. It's not accidental. The teaching is, different leader same God. Wow, how encouraging for the new leader and how encouraged you should be that kids eternally had their lives saved this past week at VBS. How encouraged you ought to be at the new members who are just added here. The future of this place is pretty great. How affirming for this church.

God will do the same thing when a new leader comes, but then he sends them to Jericho. Picture this scene. Joshua, what's the battle plan? "I've consulted God. We are to march around the city." Then what? "Then we go back to camp." Day two, what are we going to do today? It was the same as the first day and about day four, can you imagine the conversation? I say, "did the search committee even talk to any references? Maybe we should have been nicer to old Moses while he was still on the scene." Day seven, something new. Praise God. "Today we march around the city seven times. Then we yell." What kind of an unorthodox battle plan is this one? God affirms every leader. He also tests every leader and He basically says, "You're going to do this your way based on your own wisdom, or we going to do this my way, even when it doesn't make sense?" We're way ahead of ourselves, but I couldn't leave that one out.

Here are all seven principles. Because they applied these principles, the Book of Joshua is one of the most triumphant books in all of Scripture. Because this transition was so healthy, not only does the storyline continue, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, this is his family tree but our eternal destiny is on the line based on what happens to this family, this people. Because there is no conflict, because this went so well, this also cements the legacy of Moses. He didn't get to go into the promised land. He just looked at it from Mount Nebo. He tried to negotiate with God. He negotiated with God when God called him at the burning bush and they went back and forth like a ping pong match. This time Moses goes before the Lord and God says the answer is no, and we're not going to speak of this again. It's a very short conversation this time. Because this transition was so healthy when Jesus appeared at His transfiguration, He had Elijah by His side representing the prophets and Moses representing the law, Moses was not forgotten. Moses' place in history was cemented because this transition went well and other reasons.

Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith chapter, says things like this person by faith did this. Moses gets 11 verses in Hebrews 11 more than just about anybody else there. This is the coolest one of all. What do you think's the most famous verse in the Bible, or what's the first verse you learn? For me, it would be John 3:16 which says *[16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* That verse is just not dropped in there in no context, but this is in a conversation with Nicodemus where he says to Jesus, "How can I know I have eternal life, Rabbi?" Jesus explains to him, "You have to be born again, not physically, but spiritually from above, not by water, but by the Spirit" and in the context of this comes this wonderful verse.

Do you ever think about what comes before John 3:16? It's not a trick question. It is John 3:14-15 which says *[14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of*

Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. The people had rebelled, they disobeyed God, sent venomous snakes, people are dying. They say “Lord, help us, please. We're sorry.” And Moses was instructed to take the serpent, the very being that carried out the judgment and the discipline and hold it up high and if people would look to it in repentance and humility, the judgment would stop and they would be saved. Jesus Himself says, “Do you remember that story? Nicodemus, you know it well. You've probably taught it just like that happened, so it is with the Son of Man” as Jesus is referring to Himself who must be lifted up not on a pole, but on a Roman cross. Moses was part of the illustration that Jesus Himself chose to explain.

Now, how does this born again thing even work? Nobody needs to worry about Moses just because the transition to Joshua went well. And if you feel conflict of I'm not ready yet to talk about the future because I'm still grieving, I understand that. Don't let anybody put you on a schedule, but one of the best ways to honor your pastor is to do well in this season and not just look at some other highly gifted and trained individual and think we just need to wait till Joshua shows up. You are Joshua. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You that You are not surprised by transitions. We are shocked by them. Our world is rocked, but, I believe on May 18th You shed the first tear because all forms of death are a result of the mess that we have made of Your perfect creation. But, Lord, it is still true that You are still sovereign and what the enemy means for evil, Lord, You can repurpose for good. Lord, may You do that for us here at Briarwood, for our good yes, but ultimately Lord, for Your glory, for Your Kingdom that transcends and far overshadows any one of our lives. In Jesus' Name, we pray, Amen.