

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 1 – Exodus 17:8-16 ‘Joshua – Origin Story pt 1’

Today we begin a new series looking at the major Old Testament book of Joshua. It’s a story of faith, of courage, of leadership, but also of a real human being, who has spent decades as Moses’ understudy and is awed by the responsibility.

Joshua’s story begins a lot further back than most of us realise. It’s common in big films and series nowadays to construct ‘origin stories’ that tell us where this super-hero or criminal mastermind came from. Usually this is a brilliant way to persuade us to part with more of our hard-earned cash, as we watch the ‘prequel’ to the apparently endless sequels! But, in the case of Joshua, it’s really useful to spend a few days reflecting on his life *before* the book that bears his name.

Joshua does in fact appear right near the start of the famous Exodus narrative. God’s people have only recently left Egypt and have begun their wanderings in the desert. They have already complained (a lot!), and God has patiently and miraculously provided for them: with manna to eat and water to drink. But now they face a further threat: having fled the Egyptians they are now attacked by another people, the Amalekites (v8).

Moses commissions a group to defend the Israelites, and he asks Joshua to lead them (v9) – this is the first time we encounter Joshua, fully 40 years before he takes on the major role that would define him: that of leading God’s people into the Promised Land. The fact that Moses asks Joshua suggests that he is already identified as one of the ‘senior team’ around Moses – and sure enough, Joshua leads the rearguard action and is victorious.

We may find the frequent fighting in Joshua’s life off-putting, and we’ll reflect more on this as the story develops. But today, let’s direct our gaze towards what is happening *away* from the battlefield. What makes this story remarkable is how the author indicates that what determines the outcome of the battle is not what is going on ‘down here’ but ‘up there’. Moses keeps his arms aloft in prayer and worship, and all the time he does so, the Israelites prevail. When his arms drop in fatigue, the Amalekites get the upper hand (v11).

It is a great reminder at the start of this biblical journey of how vital it is to soak our lives in prayer. Whatever challenges we face, prayer forms a key part of our ‘defence’. But even if you feel overawed by Moses’ mighty effort, perhaps you can identify with Aaron and Hur – their role was practical but no less important: they held up Moses’ arms when he was too tired to lift them himself. I love the fact that Aaron and Hur are named in this story: in the kingdom of God, everyone gets to play; everyone’s part is valuable.

Who could you support this week? In prayer, yes – but perhaps also in a Hur-like practical way. ‘The battle belongs to the Lord’ – but we all have our part to play, too.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 2 – Numbers 11:23-30 ‘Origin Story pt 2 – Zeal’

Immature fruit can taste a little sharp. That’s true in gardening – it’s also true in the spiritual life. We’re all called to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit: but often in young believers those qualities which eventually prove to be wonderful assets for the kingdom can be a little, well, prickly.

Take Joshua, for example. Since we met him in Exodus, Joshua has had the enormous privilege of accompanying Moses up the mountain (at least some of the way) when Moses went to meet with God (Ex 24:13): a sure sign that already Joshua is more than just ‘one of the team’, he is effectively Moses’ protégé.

This is confirmed by the story in Exodus 33: Joshua is with Moses at the Tent of Meeting, where God meets with Moses on a regular basis. It says, tellingly, that even after Moses went back to the Israelites camp, Joshua ‘did not leave the tent’ (Ex 33:11). It’s not clear whether this is to defend it, or because Joshua is so desperate to grow in faith and intimacy with God that he’s going to take every chance he gets – it’s probably a bit of both. It would certainly explain why Moses saw that ‘spark’ of greatness in him.

But there’s a flip side to this zeal, too. In today’s passage Moses gathers 70 elders and together they all receive the anointing of God’s Spirit (v25), such that they are able to prophesy (i.e. receive and speak God’s word). This is a major step forward in the growth of God’s people: but there’s an unexpected postscript: two of these elders are able to prophesy not just at the Tent of Meeting – the appointed place for God to meet with human beings – but also *in the main camp* (v26).

As we’ve learned, Joshua is fiercely committed to, and protective of, this Tent: and he immediately goes to Moses and says: ‘Stop them!’ (v28). Rules are rules, Moses – it’s just not cricket!

But the wise old Moses sees it differently. To paraphrase his reply in v29: ‘Calm down, Joshua. This is a good thing: more encounters with God means more blessing. I wish our spiritual life as a people would get to the stage where *everyone* is intimate with God, and is able to receive and speak his word.’ That’s not a bad dream, is it? And it hints at a beautiful truth fully realised more than a thousand years later, after the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost...

Joshua’s zeal to ‘do things right’ meant he missed the wood for the trees. His motives were basically good: he wanted to do things God’s way – as he saw it. But his view of God was too small. He limited God in his imagination, and so failed to see the bigger picture: that God was increasing his blessing to more people, and spreading it in a way that could bear fruit.

There’s a great lesson here for us. God is always bigger, and sometimes his kingdom is at work in surprising ways. Think of the Magi – suspect astrologers blessed by God to witness the birth of the Messiah – a great reminder of this glorious truth. No-one is beyond the reach of God.

What surprising people do you know, in whom God is up to something? Pray for eyes to see, and a heart to bless, what our great big God is doing!

Day 3 – Numbers 13:25-14:20 ‘Origin Story pt 3 – Grasshoppers’

Today’s reading ought to have shortened the bible by about 65 pages – and there you were, wondering why it got so long! As we arrive at Numbers chapter 13 the Israelites have also arrived: at the borders of the Promised Land, a few months after leaving Egypt. God has kept them safe as they’ve journeyed through the desert, given his Law to Moses, provided food and water, and met with them regularly at the Tent of Meeting (as we saw yesterday).

Now it’s time to enter the land God had promised them – or is it? It starts well enough: Moses sends a crack squad inside the borders to take a look (13:3), and Caleb and Joshua return full of faith. Caleb even advises Moses to go for it (v30). But the others think differently: ‘We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’ (v31)

This report spreads, and like all rumours, picks up speed as it goes. By the time it reaches most of the camp, the inhabitants of the Promised Land are like giants (v32), against which God’s people are like grasshoppers (v33)!

Even so, Joshua and Caleb still try and convince the crowd that God is bigger than the obstacles they face: much better to trust God: ‘Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.’ (v9) It doesn’t work. The people dig their heels in, and are only spared a worse fate because Moses intervenes (again) with God. And so for the next 65 pages the Israelites spend 40 years in the wilderness, and then have the law re-read to them – which takes us through the rest of Numbers and Deuteronomy.

This is a great passage for our times. We face huge challenges at present, and each of them can seem like giants. And these challenges are real, and frightening. *But God is bigger than all of them.* As Jesus encourages us: what matters most is not the mountain, but Who moves it.

It’s not a magic cure or a magic wand: but it is a word of hope. God is enough. Us plus God can overcome whatever we face. May we be inspired by Joshua’s example today, seize that mustard seed of faith, and pray into our challenges. What matters is not the mountain, but Who can move it.

Day 4 – Numbers 26:63-65 & 27:15-23 ‘Origin Story pt 4 – Commission’

This year we celebrate 70 years’ reign of our monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. It has been an extraordinary life, and most of us probably think we’ll never see another monarch like her: who combines length of life with a quiet moral authority which sets her above most of her peers. As the papers increasingly report signs of her declining health, deep down we all suspect that we won’t be blessed by her presence much longer: which will make this year’s celebrations all the more special.

Our current situation probably gives us a small insight into what it must have been like for God’s people, as Moses’ own time draws to a close. And I imagine many of the people would have felt in their hearts, as we do: ‘They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.’

Moses also knows his own time is drawing to a close, and so in today’s passage he finally – and formally – hands over the reins to his long-time deputy Joshua. As we’ve seen, this relationship began over 40 years ago, when Joshua was a young man. Now he is in late middle age – or older still – and at long last his time has come. His commissioning is both public – in front of the entire assembly of God’s people (v22) – and spiritual: Moses is instructed to lay his hand of blessing upon Joshua, who the Lord testifies already has ‘the spirit of leadership’ (v18).

It is interesting that even the Lord recognises Moses’ uniqueness: Joshua receives ‘some of Moses’ authority’ (v20): not all, it appears. But that is to be expected: Moses is a one-off. Joshua will never command the same authority: but then again, he doesn’t need to. God will equip him for the tasks He is calling him to do, which is all Joshua needs.

And that’s the point: it is wisely observed that God doesn’t call those who He equips, but *equips those He calls*. God will give Joshua enough grace for whatever he is called to. And that is true for us, too. God will equip you for whatever He calls you to. He doesn’t ask you to be perfect, just faithful and obedient. And even if you feel you’ve been preparing a long time for this, take heart from the example of Joshua!

Perhaps you are feeling God nudging you towards something. Let today be an encouragement to you. If the Lord is calling you, He will also commission you: i.e. equip you for the task. And if that’s not where you find yourself today, perhaps take a moment to pray for Prince Charles, who has served a Joshua-length apprenticeship: that the Lord would commission and equip him for the task he will be soon be called to undertake.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 5 – Joshua 1:1-9 ‘I am with you’

The births of each of our children were two of the best days of our lives. I’m sure most parents would say the same! We do remember, though, arriving home from hospital the following day with our new-born daughter (our first child), and experiencing a moment of sheer terror: here we were, with this beautiful little bundle, completely helpless and dependent on us, and it was now on us to look after her – *all the time*. To feed her, clean her, clothe her, settle her, protect her, love her. To learn what each of her cries meant, how to help her into a functioning pattern of living, when to be concerned about something and when not to be; and to know what advice was worth listening to, and what wasn’t!

We had read the books, and attended the classes, we had looked after younger siblings and nephews and nieces, we had prayed for it and longed for it: but now there was no going back. We were parents: we’d just jumped into the deep end, and we had to sink or swim! And, as it is for most new parents, the realisation of that reality was, briefly, terrifying.

It’s a very different example, but I imagine that Joshua was going through a similar moment in today’s passage. As we’ve seen, the start of the book of Joshua is not the start of Joshua’s story: he’s been around a long time. He’s learned from the best, matured in all kinds of ways, he’s served a 40-year apprenticeship, when all is said and done: but now the moment has come. His people are dependent on him, and God’s plans need him to step up.

And he’s terrified. We know that he is because God needs to repeat his pep talk to him three times: ‘Be strong and courageous (v6)... be strong and very courageous (v7)... ‘have I not commanded you? (i.e. how many times I am going to have to say this, Joshua...) Be strong and courageous!’ (v9)

Why is God so insistent? And what will give Joshua confidence to believe it? Not because of his abilities, or his training, or his experience, or his commissioning per se. But because *God is with him*, and will be with him wherever he goes.

It’s true for us, too. Our confidence rests on God’s abiding presence with us. It helps to remember how God has been with us in the past, which gives us confidence to know he’ll be with us in the future: but in the end, we seize this wonderful truth in faith and trust – God is with us. And will be with us to the end of time.

This is the source of our hope, our confidence. Take a few moments today to give thanks that God is with you, right now. Ask to sense more of that presence. And seize by faith that he *will* be with you, whatever you face today, and in this season.

Day 6 – Joshua 1:10-18 ‘Mutual support’

Back in the days when my knees still worked properly, my weekly delight was 5-a-side football. Every Wednesday evening, I would let off steam for an hour. As we were an ad-hoc bunch of blokes who were old enough to know better, we didn't have organised teams, we just made up the teams from whoever turned up on the night. In effect, the game was different every week, and this provided a fascinating insight into the world of team dynamics.

Sometimes I would look at the line-ups and fancy our chances. Other times I would inwardly grimace and prepare for a beating. Occasionally something wonderful happened. On paper we would look like a far weaker team, but then something would just click and we would win the game. Team-mates started playing out of their skins, we settled into a spontaneous 'formation' that was effective in defence and penetrating in attack, and we all felt that beautiful but mysterious thing called 'chemistry'. It's hard to explain, but you know it when you see it.

Teamwork is vital in life. When people pull for each other, it's an amazing thing. Good teams lead to people being both happier and more productive. There's a sense of purpose and a collective joy in 'achieving something together'. Teamwork is great, not just in workplaces, but in families, clubs, and especially in church. As Jesus' body here on earth, we're all interconnected.

In today's passage, we see great teamwork in action. Three of Israel's tribes don't need to cross the Jordan, as the land they've been given by God is on the east side (v13). They could just stay put, while the other tribes move on. But they agree to give Joshua their wholehearted support (vv16-17), before returning across the river once more to what will become their homeland. It might well be costly, as they may lose people in the fighting that follows: but they share the vision, and at this stage they want to be obedient. They've learned the lessons of the desert, and they will support Joshua whatever he does.

There's a great encouragement for us here. Thankfully most of us aren't called to fight! But we are called to support each other, to be part of God's bigger vision for his kingdom. In God's team, everyone is valuable, everyone has a role. I originally wrote this reflection just before the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity began, but its truth applies throughout the year: may God grant us all grace to be a united people, and to support each other in building God's kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. What might that mean for each of us?

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 7 – Joshua 2:1-24 ‘Rahab’s testimony’

If I was to ask you to name any of the great confessions of faith in the bible, I wonder which you might recall? Perhaps it would be Solomon’s great prayer at the dedication of the Temple; or David’s poetic psalms; or Isaiah’s encounter with the living God; or Peter’s and Thomas’ impassioned recognition of Jesus’ identity; or Paul’s erudite sermons and beautiful phrasing?

Not many of us would mention this passage: and yet here, tucked away in this chapter, is one of the great confessions of faith. And even more wonderfully, it comes from a most unlikely source.

Rahab is one of the forgotten heroes of the Old Testament, whose actions here pave the way for what follows. As a prostitute she was considered the lowest of the low, not least by the standards of Israel’s law. I suspect she was visited by Joshua’s spies, not because she was expected to be helpful, but as the easiest ‘cover story’: who would raise an eyebrow at two young male travellers visiting a prostitute?

But when called upon, she acts with extraordinary bravery: risking her own life to hide them, and sending the King of Jericho’s soldiers off in the wrong direction. Even more amazingly, she gives her reasons for her courageous – you might say foolhardy – behaviour: ‘I know the Lord has given this land to you...’ (v9). What she says next (v11) is astounding: ‘the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.’

The wording of this confession of faith is matched in only two other places in the Old Testament: by Moses and Solomon. It is unprecedented among those considered to be outside God’s people. And yet Rahab, this ‘woman of the world’, says something which puts her on a par with Moses the friend of God, and Solomon the wisest king.

Truly the kingdom of God is like that mustard seed, which grows in the most extraordinary ways and among the most unlikely people. Rahab had eyes to see what so many others missed, and in doing so, not only saved the spies but her family too – more on that in a few days’ time.

We are, all of us human beings, born with a ‘God-shaped hole’, that desire to seek something – or Someone – beyond ourselves; and ‘our hearts are not at rest until they find their rest in You’ (St Augustine). Let’s be inspired by the example of Rahab to pray with renewed hope for that God-shaped hole to bear fruit in those we love, and in others we didn’t expect. And – praise be to God – in us, too!

Note: with grateful thanks to Alianore Smith, who provided some of today’s material.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 8 – Joshua 3:1-17 ‘Following the Ark’

Once, when asked how he made decisions about church life and leadership, a well-known Christian leader replied: ‘I look to see what God is already doing and then try to follow that.’

If you’re anything like me, it’s easy sometimes to lose sight of the literal meaning of the word ‘follower’: it automatically implies the leader is ahead, and we are, well, following. For many of us, we might say that we are doing our best to keep up!

There’s been a lot of talk about ‘leadership’ in Christian circles over the last generation, but all good leaders know their authority and fruitfulness rests on the extent to which they themselves follow Someone greater – the Lord. Our leadership is ultimately defined by how closely we follow. We see what God is up to, and throw our energies into that, and pray for grace to stay close to the Lord and not head off on our own.

And this is not just a good strategy for churches or leaders, it’s a great pointer for all of us. We go where God leads us. Sometimes that is very clear, at other times less so. But it’s always a great question to ask ourselves: what is God up to in our lives? In what ways are we growing, or being challenged, or being prompted? What buttons is God pressing at the moment?

In today’s passage, the people of Israel are given one very clear and simple command: follow the Ark. The Ark symbolised God’s presence with them: and where the Ark led, they followed – literally. As the decisive moment comes to cross the Jordan, the Ark leads the way, and the people are called to exercise faith and follow.

Let’s note, too, that this exercising of faith was active. The priests carrying the Ark had to put their foot in the water before it began to dry up. It’s a healthy reminder that faithful following starts with prayer but usually continues with action. As the people obey, so God works an amazing miracle, and the nation crosses safely into the Promised Land.

Today, as followers of Jesus, let’s pray for grace to see clearly where God is leading us, where he is at work in our lives – and let’s pray for equal grace to be faithful in following, wherever that may be.

Day 9 – Joshua 4:1-24 ‘The power of remembering’

In both of our churchyards you'll find War Memorials. These were erected after the Great War as our communities – like thousands around the country – tried to come to terms with the horror of what had happened. 27 men lost their lives from two small villages in four years. I learned recently that stonemasons around the country were inundated with work in 1919-21, because so many communities were commissioning their own 'stones of remembering'.

The power of memorials is not just for communities, though. Every month I receive applications from families to put stones in one or other of our churchyards to commemorate a loved one. It's always powerful to read how a family tries to sum up what their loved one meant to them in a few words etched into stone. If you walk around any of our churchyards you'll see hundreds of these 'stones of remembering': and each one is primarily a memorial of love.

Our passage today centres on Israel's own 'stones of remembering'. The people had just witnessed a great miracle: able to walk through the Jordan in flood season, as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Before the episode finishes, however, Joshua commands one last thing: 12 stones are to be taken from the river-bed – stones which could only be picked up because the river had temporarily stopped flowing – and placed on the west side of the Jordan as a sign of what God had done. 'These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel for ever.' (v7) They were a nation's 'stones of remembering'.

Throughout the bible we are encouraged to remember, as part of our story of faith. To remember who God is, to remember what God has done for us, and for others. To remember times when God has saved us, or blessed us, or indeed times when we have neglected God and returned to him.

As I've said before, our memory is our identity. Remembering the past inspires our present and gives us hope for the future. Israel was soon to move on from this place of remembering: they had work to do and a land to settle in. But there's a reason Joshua told them to mark this place 'for ever'. It would be somewhere they could return to, to remind themselves of their story with God, of how God had been with them. The narrator notes that these stones 'are there to this day' (v9).

Today, take a few moments to remember. There may be loved ones that come to mind, people we want to give thanks for. And let's also remember our journey with God: perhaps there's a particular moment that comes to mind, too. Let that memory fill your heart, inspire you, and give you grace for your ongoing journey this day.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 10 – Joshua 5:1-12 ‘Essential preparations’

Back in London where we used to live, the area next to us – called Furzedown – had no pubs in it. This was a surprise, since it was a relatively affluent area with a large number of houses: plenty of people in other words, who would gladly have used a local place to meet and socialise. The reason Furzedown had no pubs was because, 300 years previously, the land had been owned by Quakers, and they had put a restrictive covenant on the land banning the sale of alcohol.

Although the land had long since been sold and developed, the covenant was unbreakable. 300 years later, you still had to walk into another area to buy a drink. (As an aside, this made it an extremely desirable area to live in – very safe and quiet!)

A covenant is a word rarely used nowadays: mostly, we use ‘contracts’. But it’s a very important and powerful word, particularly in our journey of faith. A covenant is a solemn and unconditional promise, rooted in love. It’s not a contract, which breaks when one side doesn’t honour it. A covenant pledges one party to the other unconditionally. A Christian marriage is a covenant, whereas a civil marriage is formalised with the ‘contracting’ words.

The different language is significant, and the ‘x-factor’ of the vows made in a Christian marriage is rooted of course, in God’s eternal love. And this in turn goes back to the fundamental building block of God’s relationship with us. What God makes with his people is not a contract, it’s a *covenant*: a binding promise based on unconditional love.

This covenant was first made with Abraham in Genesis 12, and re-stated several times. Significantly for today’s passage, the outward sign of this covenant between God and his people is the circumcision of all males (Genesis 17).

During their time in the desert, this ritual had been allowed to lapse (v5): but now, before God’s people embarked on their entry into the Promised Land, every male was circumcised (v8). This might seem a strange way of preparing for what lay ahead, which would likely include conflict as well as settlement. Not many armies would prepare like this now! But what it symbolised was the people’s determination to live under God’s covenant, to be obedient to him. Thus, they also celebrated the Passover (v10) – another great commemoration of God’s saving love and power in their lives.

After Christ, we no longer need to undergo this physical marking: for which most of us are very grateful! Instead, what we offer is what St Paul vividly describes as a ‘circumcision of the heart’ (Romans 2:29). It is our hearts that mark us as God’s beloved, and where God dwells by his Spirit.

Give thanks today that God has made his covenant with *you*: fully and unconditionally. And as that beautiful thought lifts our hearts in praise, dedicate yourselves and your day to this loving Lord.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 11 – Joshua 5:13-6:21 ‘The fall of Jericho’

The story of the fall of Jericho is one of those iconic Old Testament stories. Packed with drama, and involving a mighty miracle, it's been a staple of Sunday Schools for generations.... but many of us reading it adults may feel somewhat more ambivalent. The children's version is a rip-roaring tale of derring-do; the adult version may well feel a certain horror at the levels of destruction involved, including the slaughter of residents that would nowadays fall foul of the Geneva Convention.

How do we reconcile these conflicting feelings? Many Christians read stories like Jericho and decide that most of the Old Testament really isn't for them. The God they see described seems rather more severe than the God revealed in Christ: and yet the New Testament insists that we worship a God who is 'the same, yesterday, today and forever.' How do we make sense of this?

Here it's valuable to introduce the vital concept of Progressive Revelation. This means that God reveals himself gradually to human beings. It's not that God changes, but rather that the human culture of the time can only cope with a certain level of revelation – until the time of Christ when we finally get a full picture of who God really is.

The events at Jericho may trouble us now: but they were 'normal' at the time. Twice in the preceding centuries Jericho had been destroyed in similar fashion by other invaders. Situated in an oasis, it was a key strategic settlement. Human life then was not accorded the same value as it is now: a value primarily influenced by Christian theology over the last 2,000 years.

The God who is progressively revealed in the bible would, in time to come, make the value of all life clear to humanity. But at this point in time, in the second millennium BC, what the people needed to understand was that this God was Lord of all the earth, and that, having settled in the land, this people were to live conspicuously holy lives dedicated to this Lord. If Israel failed militarily, other cultures would automatically have assumed that their God was pathetic and unworthy of worship. Humanity simply wasn't ready yet for the idea that true love and authority is manifested in gentle and selfless service – 'weakness', if you like.

The story of Rahab (to which we return tomorrow) is in fact the key pointer towards the direction of theological travel which the bible will undertake. A story of grace and redemption hiding in the rubble of Jericho. Such stories are seeded through the Old Testament like jewels hidden in a tapestry – or treasure in a field, as someone once said!

Today, let's give thanks that this God continued to reveal himself over time. And let's pray that God continues to reveal more of himself – in truth, beauty, love and grace – to all of us. There's always more to receive!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 12 – Joshua 6:22-27 & Matthew 1:5-6 ‘Rahab’s destiny’

Our week began with Rahab. It’s fitting that it ends with Rahab, too – as she is indeed spared, along with all her family. Her courage and faith was rewarded, not just with life, but with a place in God’s people: ‘she lives among the Israelites to this day’ (v25).

As we reflected yesterday, this is a beautiful story of grace and redemption in the middle of a robust narrative of conflict. Somehow Rahab had grasped who the Lord was – despite, as far as we know, never having encountered the Israelites directly before – and was prepared to risk her life to serve this Lord. It is a wonderful reminder of how God’s grace is at work in all kinds of places and all kinds of people. No-one is beyond God’s love, or reach.

But there is a beautiful post-script to this story – one we don’t learn in Joshua, but only many centuries later, at the start of Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 1:5-6). After the events at Jericho, Rahab is freed from prostitution and marries a man called Salmon, one of the Israelite settlers. They have a family, including a son called Boaz. This is the Boaz who marries Ruth in the Old Testament story who bears her name. Boaz is King David’s great-grandfather... in other words, Rahab is King David’s great-great-grandmother! And therefore also, by definition, a direct descendant of Jesus himself.

It is fitting that a woman of such faith and courage should have a bigger part to play in the story of scripture. It also reminds us that when God rescues us, he also gives us a new purpose in life. We all have a valuable part to play in God’s kingdom coming: there are ‘good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.’ (Ephesians 2:10) We may be aware of (some of) those things which God has planned for us; we may even feel we have largely fulfilled them, one way or another; or we may still be wondering. Perhaps God is pointing you in a new direction, or stirring something new in you.

Grace saves us as we are. But it doesn’t leave us as we are. We journey with the Lord, in faith and hope. May Rahab’s story inspire us this week, and renew our desire to live fruitful lives, for God’s glory. Grace is truly the fuel for life.

Day 13 – Joshua 7:1-26 ‘A lesson in humility’

In 2021 our Queen memorably declined an award: she was nominated to be ‘Oldie of the Year’ by the magazine of that name, but wrote in reply that she felt she didn’t meet the criteria and hoped ‘someone more worthy’ would be given it instead.

It is a remarkable display of humility to which we have become accustomed with our monarch – all the more notable for being so rare in other walks of life. There are famous examples of actors and musicians who have refused awards in protest, but very few because they felt unworthy to receive it.

After the euphoria of the victory against Jericho, today’s passage marks a downturn in Israel’s quest to settle in the Promised Land. The presenting issue is one of obedience: they were specifically instructed by the Lord not to profit from their conquest by taking ‘devoted things’ from those they overcame. This could in some instances refer to religious artefacts which contravened their status as God’s people – but in this case it was just valuable ‘stuff’. A chap called Achan pinched a beautiful robe as well as some gold and silver and hid it in his tent (v21).

The result was disastrous: Israel incurred God’s displeasure and lost their favour in battle. They were routed by a tiny hamlet called Ai (which means ‘The Ruin’, just to emphasise how far their star had fallen – they were beaten by non-place!), and realised that something was desperately wrong.

Achan and his family sadly paid the price for his wrongdoing, but there is more going here. Yes, we learn from this that obedience and purity matters; but things had started to go wrong before Achan’s greed got the better of him. Joshua was specifically instructed by God not to go into battle without enquiring of the Lord (Numbers 27:21 – see Day 4): and yet here, he sends out spies and then warriors on his own initiative. It seems the victory at Jericho temporarily went to his head as well.

Most poignantly, this passage reminded Israel that their success was entirely due to God: not their bravery or their tactics or their military skill. They only succeed *if God is with them*. This hard but vital lesson in humility runs throughout the history of the Old Testament – but it is a word for us today, as well.

Ultimately, everything we are and do relies on God. Naturally, we offer our time and energies, and our skills are important, too. But it’s risky to give ourselves too much credit. As Mary says in her beautiful song: ‘God has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.’

May God grant us grace to choose humility this week, trusting in his mighty power and love to lift us up, for every circumstance and situation.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 14 – Joshua 8:1-35, Galatians 3:13-14 ‘The Tree’

Today’s passage is one of the reasons why most people – even Christians – don’t read much of the Old Testament. It’s also why I thought long and hard about whether to look at Joshua for our Daily Inspirations. Where’s the feel-good factor here, the nugget of encouragement?! It’s tempting to settle for enjoying the Psalms, maybe the last bit of Isaiah and a few other iconic stories, but leave the other 1,000 pages of the Old Testament alone!

And yet: if we believe that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed’ – and bear in mind that St Paul wrote this when the New Testament hadn’t been assembled, so he was referring to the Old Testament – we have to tackle passages like this head-on, and ask the hard questions. Why it is here? Why the destruction?

The central question which the bible addresses, and which is the besetting problem of all human history, is the corruption of the human heart. God made us to walk with him, in loving intimacy and joyful obedience. But we just don’t. Mostly we either won’t, or can’t. This is the universal human condition – but it’s not what we were created to be. So how do we restore this loving relationship, how do we live the kind of life God calls us to?

By the time of Joshua, the people had God’s law, given to them through God’s encounters with Moses. But they were endlessly distracted by the cultures around them: so the solution was to live in a land where there were no other influences. That is why they are told to purge all other inhabitants: to create an environment in which they could obey God’s law completely, and in doing so, become a model society which demonstrated to the rest of humanity the right way to live.

It failed, and even before his death, Moses knew why, and told them so – the problem was not God, or his law, but us: ‘Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you... For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall on you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord.’ (Deuteronomy 31:26,29)

Harsh words: but proved true, again and again. The people’s heads were turned by the pagan cultures around them, whose religions not only included worshipping other deities, but some truly abominable practices: child sacrifice was not uncommon in parts of the land they were settling. We need to beware seeing the towns they were fighting against as ‘innocents’ – brutality was normal, and there was little concept of the individual: tribes lived, or died, together.

Ultimately, the Old Testament shows us that we need another way, a better way. And God gave us a radical new solution: he would take the evil of the world – my evil, your evil – upon himself, and then dwell in our hearts directly. This new solution is promised in the Old Testament, but also embedded in ‘glimmers of grace’ throughout its pages. Even here, in this grimmest of chapters, we see it. As the King of Ai is raised on a wooden pole, so we can’t help but think of Someone Else, more than 1,000 years later who would likewise be lifted on a wooden pole, for our salvation. As St. Paul testifies in Galatians 3, the curse of being lifted on a tree becomes the source of grace. God enters into this broken world and redeems even its harshest practices.

Today, give thanks that God led humanity towards a better way. It may be some way off in Joshua, but there are echoes here. Grace is the beautiful, subversive idea which runs like a golden thread through all of Scripture: and which has, gloriously, saved you, and me.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 15 – Joshua 9:1-27 ‘They did not enquire’

I love a good disguise. I’m hopeless at wearing them myself – being well over 6ft tall, it’s hard to convince anyone that you aren’t who you are. But the world of fiction and entertainment is full of great disguises: I’m reading the Arsene Lupin novels at the moment, and pretty much every chapter has the hero (anti-hero?) in some get-up or other.

Occasionally disguises find their way into real life too. Arguably even our Lord Jesus himself was briefly ‘disguised’ on the Road to Emmaus, and there are numerous other stories of good disguises in the bible, including the unusual story which occupies our attention today.

After the destruction of Jericho and Ai, the surrounding areas are understandably nervous. Some of the tribes decide that attack is the best form of defence (vv1-2) – but the Gibeonites decide instead on a ‘ruse’. They disguise themselves as travellers from afar (vv4-6), and so win the assurance of protection, since God’s law commanded the Israelites to welcome the stranger and provide for their needs. Having been awarded that protection under oath, even when their deception was brought to light, they remained protected, since it was also forbidden to break an oath (v20).

Although both of these acts of obedience might be said to cast the Israelites in a more favourable light, the real heart of the story is found in v14: ‘The Israelites,’ it says, ‘sampled their provisions but did not enquire of the Lord.’ They made decisions themselves rather than seek the wisdom of God through prayer, and so found themselves caught in a dilemma, where they would end up being disobedient in some way, whichever course of action they took.

The story is in fact a perfect illustration of Moses’ warning, which we looked at briefly yesterday. It never takes long for God’s people to go back to relying on themselves, rather than God. It is a healthy reminder that success in the spiritual life can produce complacency rather than humility, and that it is never wasted time to seek the Lord in prayer for wisdom and guidance on decisions and choices that we make. Whatever decisions and choices you face today, offer them to the Lord. God always repays.

There is another echo of grace here, too. The Gibeonites were hereafter employed as woodcutters and water-carriers, to assist in Israel’s worshipping life (v27). Over a thousand years later, another woodworker would open the way for us to worship the one true God, and would provide water which would quench our thirst eternally, becoming a spring welling up to eternal life (John 4:14). May that same Lord grant us grace to drink from the water of life today.

Day 16 – Joshua 10:1-15 ‘On our behalf’

Chapters 10-12 of Joshua, in whirlwind fashion from 10:28 onwards, detail the Israelites’ successful conquest of much of the land. It’s a hard read, so today’s passage is illustrative, and I’ve chosen it in part because it allows us to keep looking for those ‘echoes of grace’ tucked away in the narrative of battles and blood-letting.

It’s a dramatic story, and begins with five rival kings who unite against Joshua’s army. What is notable here is the contrast with the Gibeonites in the preceding chapter – especially in relation to their motivations for fighting. The Gibeonites were in awe of the fame of the Lord (9:9-10); these kings had heard only of the fame of Joshua (v4).

That Gibeon was able to make a peace treaty with the Israelites is illustrative of the reason for this conquest of the land, as we saw on Wednesday. God was creating a holy nation, flourishing under his law, who would point to the glory of the Lord, and so cause others to worship this Lord, the one true God. The Gibeonites saw the *Lord’s* glory (not Joshua’s), and having made peace, they engaged in the worshipping life of Israel by tending to its altar (9:27).

The Amorite kings, however, simply saw this conflict as army versus army, a struggle for power and control. The Lord did not factor into their plans – which proved their undoing, as the Lord intervened to help the Israelites in two striking ways. First, a hailstorm hindered their army’s escape; then, more spectacularly, ‘time stood still’ (v13).

Scholars have long debated whether this actually happened: in the end, you either have to believe that God is able to work miracles, or he isn’t. This is not one which allows for an alternative ‘natural’ explanation. What it did mean is that as the Amorite army headed eastwards up the hill towards Joshua’s army, the early morning sun would have been in their eyes – and if time ‘stopped’ for a while, would have remained so, putting them at serious disadvantage for the duration of the battle.

So the narrator concludes: ‘Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!’ (v14) And whilst, after the coming of Christ, this no longer happens in military terms, it is true to say that we sometimes need the Lord to fight for us, even today. Not with armies, but with the powers of heaven to change situations, defend the weak or vulnerable, or bring justice where it has been denied.

Perhaps you can call to mind times when you have felt that the Lord has ‘fought for you’. Certainly many of our sisters and brothers who live with daily persecution need the Lord to ‘fight for them’, since they often have few resources to fight for themselves.

As Christians we are called to be peacemakers: but we have a Lord who is still *for* us, and loves his people, especially those who are suffering or forsaken by others. Let’s raise our faith today to pray that the Lord will intervene in situations where we need him to ‘fight for us’ – not with the weapons of war, but with prayer, and with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17).

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 17 – Joshua 13:1-7 ‘Now and not yet’

Today’s passage comes as something of a shock. Over the last few chapters, the Israelites have conquered the land in what seems like a whirlwind series of successful encounters. You may be thinking that this all took a matter of a year or two, maybe even a few months.

And yet, here at the beginning of chapter 13, we learn that: (a) it took a very long time – Joshua is now ‘very old’; and (b) there was still a lot of land not conquered yet. Essentially the descriptions of verses 2-7 indicate that the Israelites now held much of the hill country running north to south along the spine of what is now Israel, but the Western plains by the Mediterranean Sea, as well as lands to the north east and south east, were not under Israelite control.

Some of these areas would rarely be under their control in the centuries that followed. Think of all the battles with the Philistines in the book of Judges or under King David – these describe the peoples that live by the Mediterranean Sea, who were never fully conquered during the time of Joshua.

Joshua’s experience in many ways mirrors the reality of our spiritual lives: it is both ‘now’ and ‘not yet’. He is living safely in the kingdom, but there is still some way to go. How true for us, too: yes, we are saved, we are living in the kingdom of God *now*, and we know can peace and purpose and rest, and many other blessings which God has given us. But it is also ‘not yet’: we are works in progress, not every part of our lives is as it should be. We face struggles and challenges: within ourselves as well as in the world.

Our calling is to be faithful, and stay on the journey. To celebrate what we have *now*, and also to wait and pray and long for what is *yet to come*.

As we conclude a challenging few days in this book, let’s sit for a few minutes with the ‘now and not yet’ of our lives. Give thanks for all that God has done for you, and in you. And pray for grace to live with the ‘not yet’. God was faithful to Joshua. He is faithful to us, too.

Day 18 – Joshua 14:1-15 ‘A promise kept’

The bible is a book full of promises. Many of them are made by human beings, and sadly are broken. But there are hundreds made by God as well, and one of the greatest encouragements of our faith is that God keeps them – all of them!

Today’s passage outlines a very personal promise kept. Caleb was one of the two spies (along with Joshua) sent into the Promised Land who faithfully believed that God would help the Israelites to settle there – we looked at this story on Day 3. Most of his colleagues simply looked at the inhabitants they were up against and their faith failed them. As a result, the Israelites had to live in the desert for forty years, and only Joshua and Caleb survived to see the day when the land was finally theirs.

Now, as ‘the land had rest from war’ (v15), is the time for God to honour his promise. Caleb approaches Joshua and asks for a parcel of land – indeed the area where his feet trod when he spied out the country 45 years ago (v9). Looking back at the narrative of the excursion in Numbers 13, the place explored the most was Hebron (Numbers 13:22), and this becomes the place given to Caleb (v13): just as God had promised through Moses.

It was a most generous gift, since Hebron has a special place in the biblical narrative: it was where God first revealed to Abraham that he would inherit *this* land (Genesis 13), and also where he was buried. In time to come it would be the capital of Judah where David would reign for 7 ½ years before he settled in Jerusalem, and later became a ‘city of refuge’. Most probably it was appealing to Caleb because it was very fertile: the Valley of Eshkol is where Caleb and his friends cut a big cluster of grapes to show Moses how good the land was.

What matters here – and our encouragement for today – is that *God keeps his promises*. He kept them to Caleb and his family; he keeps them to us as well. The consistent theme of much of Scripture is that God is faithful – which is especially good news for us, fragile as we are. As St Paul says later, even when we are faithless, ‘God remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.’ (2 Timothy 2:13).

May God’s faithfulness lift our hearts and our spirits today. Give thanks that God keeps his promises, and then pray these promises confidently for yourself, and others. Amen!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 19 – Joshua 17:14-18:10 ‘Faith and action

Today I’m being nice to you! (Only today, obviously....) Much of chapters 13-19 of the book of Joshua consists of long and detailed lists of boundaries and towns – which I’m going to spare you, save this one passage! These essentially define the land allotted to each tribe, and in which they can now settle.

At one level, it’s a good reminder that this is an actual historical document which defines boundaries which will be determinative in the life of Israel for centuries to come. At a deeper level, the sub-text to all of this detail is the vital truth that *God keeps his promises*. Each of these tribes was promised a share of the land: and each now received it.

Today’s passage is interesting, however, because it indicates that, despite their victories, a large proportion of the population that made up the tribes were somewhat reluctant to spread out and now settle in the land (18:3) – one can imagine that ‘safety in numbers’ factored quite high in their considerations.

In that sense, the very practical process of settling down – inhabiting towns, building (or rebuilding) dwellings, farming crops and livestock – was an act of faith. For it was only at this point that the ‘average’ Israelite would have to leave the security of a large and heavily defended camp and live in the land.

So Joshua has to give seven of the tribes a ‘nudge’ to get on with it (18:3-4). He has to be even more direct with the tribe of Joseph who had already been awarded their land, which is the subject of 17:14-18. ‘Our land is too small,’ they complained. To which Joshua effectively said: ‘Actually, your faith is too small.’ There was a large forested area in their land which could be cleared and settled. This would require facing opposition, but also good old-fashioned hard work, creating brand new settlements alongside the much easier task of inhabiting the existing ones.

It is a healthy reminder that *faith and action often go together*. To ‘believe’ is not a passive thing: it is active, it thrives when it is lived out day-by-day. You could say that faith works! We demonstrate faith in very practical ways: in how we live, in what we invest in, in taking the opportunities which the Lord gives us.

Perhaps today, spend a few minutes reflecting whether there is a particular part of your faith which God is nudging you to put into practice. And if there’s nothing that stands out, why not ask the Lord to show you any people whom your faith can actively bless today.

Day 20 – Joshua 20:1-9 ‘Cities of refuge’

We all love the idea of ‘safe places’ – places of sanctuary, of protection. For many of us we like to imagine our home as being such a place, or a particular room in our home; for others it’s a place of worship; it might even be a remote spot, somewhere quiet where we feel free.

The idea of refuge has a long and noble history, pre-dating even today’s chapter. And it remains current today: we build refuges for those escaping domestic violence, and the word ‘refugee’ now applies to all fleeing places of danger or crisis, and seeking safety and sanctuary elsewhere.

Today’s chapter forms a key part of our modern understanding of refuge – albeit within a very specific context related to justice. As the land was being settled, the Israelites also needed to establish the rule of law and a functioning system of justice. In particular, after years of military conflict when bloodshed had become commonplace, it was particularly important to remember that in peace-time, the shedding of blood was forbidden by God’s law. And if blood was shed, that had to be repaid by blood: murderous blood pollutes the land (Numbers 35:33) and must be satisfied.

The Jewish law established what became the fundamental building block of all legal systems, including ours today: ‘an eye for an eye’ – in other words that the punishment fits the crime. But what if someone was killed accidentally? Should that mean the death sentence? Cities of refuge were the answer. Six were established – three on each side of the Jordan – where a killer could flee to, and plead his or her case that the death was accidental (v4).

If the elders agreed, then instead of the death penalty, the offender was allowed to live in this city until the death of the serving High Priest – at which point they could return home (v6), and the family of the deceased were not allowed to take revenge.

It’s a wonderful idea, and hundreds (even thousands) of years ahead of its time. Today we give thanks for the vital work of all places of refuge across the world. It also reminds us that, ultimately, God is our refuge: ‘God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble,’ as Psalm 46 begins. Most powerfully of all, this God shed his own blood as satisfaction for our sins – the ultimate spiritual refuge.

Take a few moments to dwell in God’s ‘refuge’ today... and pray too for all who seek to offer refuge to others – practical expressions in our world of the eternal refuge of God.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 21 – Joshua 21:1-8,43-45 'Worship first!'

I bet you read today's passage and thought: what on earth has this got to do with worship? It's just another long list of one tribe getting particular towns to live in.... which is nice for them, but not sure what it has to do with me!

The reason is that this is the tribe of Levi – the very last to be allocated their inheritance. This tribe is the one dedicated entirely to serving the Lord as priests: in other words, to manage Israel's worshipping life. As a result they were freed from having to work the land: hence they were allotted towns to live in (with no land, as such). From this point, the other eleven tribes all gifted a tithe (a tenth of their produce) to provide food for the tribe of Levi, so they could devote themselves to leading God's people in worship.

It is a reminder that, for all the practicalities of establishing a functioning society – including the cities we looked at yesterday – Israel was first and foremost to be *a worshipping community*. A twelfth of its population (roughly!) was dedicated for this very purpose, and the remaining 90+% of the population was expected to provide for their daily needs, in order to achieve this.

For us, too, worship takes first place. We are made to worship our Lord – and worshipping is when we are most fully human, fully alive. Of course, worship is not just what we do in church: it is about giving God his rightful place of honour and glory through the *whole* of our lives. The other tribes' tithe was just as much an act of worship as what the priests did in the temple – something of which later prophets were keen to remind the Israelites.

So we, too, worship God in our work, in our marriages and family life, in our kindness towards friends and neighbours, in the way we speak and in what we think. It's all worship!

It is healthy, though, to set aside time to focus fully on worshipping God. You're reading this now, so you already know the value of dedicated time each day! A worshipping heart leads to a worshipping life.

May God grant us grace for our hearts to be renewed in worship, that our lives would likewise be dedicated to him. Amen, come Lord Jesus!

Day 22 – Joshua 22:1-34 ‘Jumping to conclusions’

It's easy to rush to a judgement. We see something, smell a rat and immediately form a conclusion – usually a negative one. By nature, I'm as guilty of this as anyone: indeed one of my appraisals from a boss of mine in the past said this: 'My one piece of advice to Matt would be to make decisions more slowly.' In other words: don't rush to a judgement, take your time!

I hope that the years have mellowed me – some of you may be nodding or shaking their heads at this point! – but today's passage is a great example of the risk of jumping to conclusions. Having served the Israelites faithfully in the conquest of the land, Joshua now sends the Eastern tribes home, full of praise for their faithfulness (vv1-4), as well as encouragement to hold fast to God (v5).

As a sign of their commitment, the tribes build an altar to the Lord as they leave – although it must be admitted this was partly due to nervousness that in times to come they would not be considered true members of God's people (v24). Their fears are proved right when the Western tribes immediately assume that this altar is being devoted to another god – and so, before hearing the Eastern tribes' reply, they threaten war (v12).

Thankfully, diplomacy is made before shots are fired: and so the Eastern tribes are given a chance to explain themselves. And they are very clear that, far from backsliding, their motivation is to continue to serve the Lord (v27). The altar will also serve as a powerful reminder that the Promised Land for God's people extends beyond the Jordan, and includes the two and half tribes – and their descendents – who live there (v25).

Ultimately, all's well that ends well – peace is restored and God is praised. Nevertheless, the Eastern tribes concluded the matter by giving the altar a name which could not be misinterpreted! (v34)

It's a good reminder that in our enthusiasm to be faithful, we must be careful to judge cautiously, and wisely. It is better to think the best of people, even whilst not being blind to their faults. If today's story brings to mind a particular situation or relationship for you, take a moment to reflect, and to pray. God is able to heal, and restore.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 23 – Joshua 23:1-16 ‘Careful to obey’

I don't know about you, but I love watching the Winter Olympics. Ever since I was a child, the Olympic Games have always been a special fortnight. Although I'm a sports nut generally, I must admit that it's largely their infrequency – the fact that you only get to watch the luge or Nordic skiing or slopestyle snowboarding every four years – is what makes The Games so great to watch. I don't watch these sports at any other time.

That said, I haven't got 15 hours every day to gorge on the live events – unfortunately! So for me, the one hour highlights package at 7pm every evening is a must-see. If I can't watch it at the time, I'll watch it later that night, or with breakfast the next day. All the drama is distilled into a manageable chunk of time.

In many ways, today's passage functions exactly like a 'highlights package' for Joshua. All of the drama of the last 22 chapters is distilled into the Executive Summary of chapter 23. Joshua is now 'very old' (v1) and knows he won't be around much longer (v14): so he gathers the nation for one last pep talk, and a re-cap of everything the Lord has done for them.

What he is at pains to stress is that *their success is entirely dependent on God*. Yes, they have been brave and well-organised: but unless the Lord had 'fought for them' (v3) their efforts would have been in vain. And in case they weren't listening the first time, Joshua repeats it again (v5)... and again (vv9-10)... and again (v13). 'One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you.'

What does the Lord ask in return? It's simple: 'Be very careful to love the Lord your God.' (v11) What does that look like? In the bible, love is more often a doing word than a feeling word: 'Be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses.' (v6) Walk the talk. Show your love by living according to the pattern the Lord has set for you.

As the book draws to a close (just one chapter left after today!), verse 6 really brings us back to where we started. It is almost a direct quotation from God's own words to Joshua in the very first chapter as he commissioned him to lead God's people into the Promised Land (1:6). And now Joshua passes it on: as he obeyed, so now the Israelites' future prosperity rests on their continued obedience.

Although, in Christ, we don't have to earn God's favour – still it remains true that grace fuels our obedience. Our grateful response to God's love is to love God, and others, in return. This week, may we, like Joshua, resolve to hold fast to scripture, and so find strength for all that this week will hold. And may this thought inspire us too: God is with *us*. His is the strength beyond our strength – all praise and glory to him!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Joshua (written 2022)

Day 24 – Joshua 24:1-33 ‘You choose!’

When our children were little, one of their absolute favourite books was called ‘You choose!’ The idea was very simple: each large double-page spread asked a question: ‘what house would you choose to live in?’ or ‘what food would you choose to eat?’ The pages offered dozens of ideas, from fairly sensible to totally crazy, and we would all put our fingers on the ones we liked best. We never tired of imagining what sort of life we would like to lead... if only it was that simple!

Today’s passage is a much more serious version of ‘You choose!’. As the people gather at Shiloh for Joshua’s farewell message, he reminds them of all that the Lord has done for them. It’s a long list, occupying verses 2-13, with the remarkable conclusion that, as a result, ‘I (God) gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build... and olive groves that you did not plant.’ (v13)

This was all the Lord’s doing, and his great desire was to continue to bless them. However, if the people decide to abandon the Lord and follow other gods – the deities of the tribes around them – they will forfeit this blessing, and disaster will surely follow.

So it comes down to this: you choose! ‘Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve....’

What happens next is brutally honest: the people all agree to serve the Lord, but Joshua has been around far too long to take that at face value, and calls them on it: ‘You are not able to serve the Lord’ – at least not for any length of time! But the people insist: ‘No! We will serve the Lord.’ So Joshua erects a stone to act as a witness to the commitment they have made, and the gathering ends (along with the book).

Was Joshua being cynical? I don’t think so – what he wants is to make them understand the gravity of the situation. It’s easy for us human beings to take God for granted, and the Israelites’ track record was patchy, to say the least. And with benefit of hindsight, we know how quickly it all unravels – you only have to flick on a page to Judges 2:10-11 to see why Joshua wasn’t optimistic.

But as we close our reflections on this book, we can’t finish in a better place than Joshua’s own concluding remark – v15: ‘But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’ In other words, whatever other people do, whatever ups and downs we face, whatever life throws at us – there’s only one good choice to make: as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

If this book could be distilled into one message, it would be this: choose God! The God who is with us, who fights for us, on whose blessing we rely. So may Joshua’s final prayer be our prayer, too. Why not pray that for yourself today, and also pray for the others reading this: that we all might choose – and keep choosing – the one in whom is life, and life in abundance. Amen.