

Welcome to The Creek everyone! My name is Dan, I have the privilege of serving as one of the pastors here at our church. No matter where you are, we are so grateful you decided to join us today. We are obviously not quite back to normal yet. As a nation and as a community, we are still trying to figure out the right steps to take, but one day at a time we are beginning to get back to normal. Restrictions are loosening, people are going into work, restaurants are opening...and as a bonus, it's getting warmer outside, too! We have so much to be thankful for.

Today we are beginning a new series studying the book of Joshua together. And I believe that through this study, God is going to do a great work in each of our lives, a great work in our church, and hopefully even a work in our community and city. As we go through Joshua chapter by chapter over the next six weeks, we are going to learn about how to have courage and resolve, even when facing unprecedented challenges. We are going to see that no matter what mistakes or failures we might have in our past, God offers us salvation when we place our faith in him. We are going to watch the miraculous provision of God. We are going to see how God fights for his people, and how he invites us into a life of holiness and prayer. No matter where you might be at, no matter what you might be going through in this unique season, I believe God has something in store for you as we study this book. With that in mind, will you turn in your Bibles with me to Joshua 1?

We are calling this series "Taking New Ground." That's what the book of Joshua is ultimately about: God's people entering into the promised land, finally receiving the actual ground that God had promised them for centuries. And as we learn about the Israelites taking new ground, I want each one of us to be thinking about areas in *our* lives where God is inviting us to take new ground, too. Perhaps there is a dream that God birthed in your heart, a calling he placed on your life, a word spoken to you about the plans God has in store for you, and this series will help prepare you to actually take that ground and enter into those promises. Or perhaps there is an area in your own life where you want to see ground claimed for the glory of God. Maybe for a long time now there has been a struggle, an addiction or a stronghold that you feel you have just not been able to overcome. Instead of being victorious, you have been defeated and dejected.

Think about the Israelites - this is the land they were supposed to inherit 40 years earlier...that's *four decades*! They should have claimed this ground an entire generation ago. They didn't. But that's all in the past now. Today is a new day! And with the help of God, they are finally going to take that ground! And maybe you feel that way right now. Perhaps emotionally, spiritually, or relationally, it feels like you've been in the wilderness for a long time, walking around in circles. If that's you, please hear me on this: Today is a new day for you, too. This can be the day when you stop wandering and finally take the ground God has promised you!

And this is relevant for us as a church family as well. We are not *just* trying to make it through this unique season with the COVID crisis, we're not *just* trying to endure without losing too much traction. We are trying to take new ground! We want to grow as a church family, we want to become stronger than ever, more united, more focused, more prayerful, more holy than we've ever been before.

Through going online we've seen our witness in the community increase. We've given more than twice the amount of money we typically do to people in need in our community, and we've given nearly four times the amount of food we usually do! And that assistance is not just a handout. Good deeds lead to goodwill in the community. Goodwill in the community prepares people's hearts to receive the good news of Jesus Christ and find salvation in his name. As a church we are for the 317, and that has become as clear today as ever before.

So just like the Israelites were called by God to take new ground, as individuals and as a church, God is calling us to take new ground, too. With that stage being set, let's jump into Joshua chapter 1. We'll read from verses 1-9:

After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them - to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates - all the Hittite country - to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

How about that for an introduction?! Verse 1 begins with the words, "After the death of Moses." Think about how significant those words are. Moses had been the leader of Israel for 40 years. Moses was the one who marched into Pharaoh's palace and declared, "Let my people go." Moses was the one who performed 10 miracles that crippled the most powerful nation in the world. Moses was the one who raised his staff and the red sea parted. He was the one who climbed a mountain and brought down the ten commandments, etched out by the finger of God. Moses was the one who prayed and water came out of a rock. When his hands were raised in intercession, the enemy armies were pushed back. When his hands were lowered, the Israelites were pushed back. Moses was the leader of all leaders. And now he's dead. Can you imagine the uncertainty, the insecurity, and even the vulnerability the people would have been feeling at this time? What are we going to do now?

But what we see in Joshua is that it was never about Moses in the first place, it was always about the God who was *at work* in Moses' life. And now, just as God raised up Moses, he is going to raise up another leader after Moses. I think that touches on a valuable lesson for us all to learn: godly leaders are great, and we should love them, support them, thank God for them and pray for them, but our faith and confidence should not ultimately be placed in godly leaders; our faith and

confidence always needs to be placed in God himself. Even the best of leaders will let us down. God never will. Even the best leaders come and go. God remains forever.

I think about our church. Gary Johnson faithfully led The Creek for 30 years. A while back I stepped into the lead pastor role, and with a team of great people, I am trying my best to serve faithfully. There will come a time when I'm not here any longer and someone else is raised up (I am hoping and praying that person is in our student ministry right now!). Godly leaders are great. But this passage reminds us that our hope and confidence should always be placed in God himself. Just two years ago Billy Graham died. God will raise up others to preach the gospel message. Just last week Ravi Zacharias died. God will raise up others to defend and explain the faith. That's what God is doing in Joshua 1. Moses has died, so God raises up Joshua to take his place.

And in chapter 1 verse 3 God tells Joshua, "I will give you every place where you set your foot." All the territory God promised their ancestors - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - will finally be theirs. And that's a lot of land. God says in 1:4, "Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates - all the Hittite country - to the Mediterranean Sea in the west." For perspective, that's about 10,000 square miles. 6.4 million acres. Slightly larger than the entire states of Maryland or Vermont!

That's a *lot* of land. And claiming this land wasn't going to be like the American west. In 1862, the United States enacted the Homestead Act, which allowed individuals or families to head west, find land they wanted, and stake a claim, up to 160 acres. If you were willing to live there and work the ground, it was yours, for free! That's not how it worked with the Israelites. Their land was inhabited, and they had to fight for it. There were 7 nations and 31 local rulers who were bigger, stronger, faster, and more militarily advanced than the Israelites living there. And remember the situation the Israelites were in - they had been slaves for 400 years and spent the most recent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. They didn't have a standing army. They didn't have a stockpile of weapons. They weren't trained in the art of war. The obstacles in front of them were real, but so were the promises of God. God promised to be with them and to fight on their behalf.

And again, think about how this applies to our lives today, to the new ground God is calling us to take for his glory, to the places in our lives where he is saying, "I've been speaking this promise over your life for years, and now is the time to finally march forward with confidence and receive it!" God has an inheritance, he has promises waiting for each one of us, but just like the inheritance God had for the Israelites, our inheritance isn't just given to us. It comes on the other side of a life of mission and obedience. Think about all the things God wants to do in and through our lives:

That area of sin that has plagued you for years, no longer having any dominion in your life.

Family members who you have prayed for for decades, joining you in the baptistry, finding new life in the love and grace of Jesus.

In a culture that seems to be sliding further and further away from God and further and further away from truth, seeing the next generation turn to God and become a counter-current to the way of the world.

I believe God wants to speak to us today and say to us like he did to Joshua, "I will give you every place you set your foot." I will open doors, I will fight on your behalf, I will fulfill my promises." That's what God has in store for us. But just like Joshua, it's not simply given to us, it comes on the other side of a life of mission and obedience. If we are going to experience the same breakthrough and victory Joshua experienced, I think we should plan to take the same steps that Joshua and the Israelites took - and there are three of them that God highlights in this passage. If we were to boil those three steps down to one word each they would be: presence, scripture, and courage. Presence. Scripture. Courage. Let's talk about each of those.

First: presence. God promised Joshua his presence; he promised to be with him. In 1:5, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. And in 1:9 he told Joshua, "The Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." In everything that Joshua did, he knew that God was with him. Joshua walked in victory and breakthrough not because of his strength, not because of his creativity, not because of his intellect or ingenuity or tenacity, he walked in victory and breakthrough because *God was with him*. In Zechariah 4:6 God promised to do a great work, a work that would leave people amazed and speechless, and he said: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." It's God's presence that makes all the difference.

Since *The Last Dance* documentary came out on ESPN, there has been a lot of talk about Michael Jordan these days. In 1990 he played a game against the Cleveland Cavaliers where he grabbed 18 rebounds and scored 69 points. 69 points!! And get this - he did it while only missing four shots the entire game! He was such a lethal scorer. After the game, one of Jordan's teammates, a rookie named Stacey King, was asked how he would remember the game. He said, "I'll always remember this as the night that Michael Jordan and I combined to score 70 points." You have to appreciate the humor and humility. What made that night special, that team special, and that dynasty special was the presence of the greatest basketball player ever on the court. Stacey King knew that. He had no grand illusions - or we could say grand *delusions* - about the role he played. He was just happy to be on the team when Jordan was doing his work.

Think about how relevant that is for the new ground we hope to take in our lives and through our lives. We are part of the equation. We are on the team. We have to show up, we have to work hard, we have to give it all we got, but at the end of the day, we know that it's God's presence inside of us that makes all the difference. He is the one who changes the odds.

And what we have going for us - which is far better than what Joshua had going for him - is that God's presence actually lives within us, within every person who has placed their faith in Jesus. Jesus actually promised us in John 14:16 that he would send the Spirit to be with us forever! In 14:26 he said, "The Holy Spirit will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." In Acts 1:8 he said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul said that the fruit of the Spirit, which is the long-term effect of having the presence of God at work in our lives, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. 1 Corinthians 12 tells us God gives us the Spirit so we can build one another up, the Spirit gives each of us gifts, that it's the presence of God inside of us, for the good of others around us. And Ephesians 1:17 says the Spirit brings wisdom and revelation, so that we may know God better.

The presence of God makes all the difference. 1 Thessalonians 5:19 says, "Don't quench the Spirit." We don't want to suppress his presence in our lives, we want to accelerate it! Instead of pouring water, we want to pour lighter fluid! God's Spirit is quenched through sin, through neglect, through selfishness, greed, gossip, negativity, anger, bitterness, unforgiveness. God's Spirit is fanned into flame through prayer, holiness, humility, generosity, kindness, love, a heart for reconciliation. The scriptures make it very clear: it's God's presence that makes all the difference, and we can either minimize or maximize his presence by the decisions we make.

Parents, this is so important in our role with our kids. Our kids need to know that God is real, not because we told them so, not because we read it to them from a book, not because people at church tell them bible stories - our kids need to know God is real because they have sensed his presence in our homes, because they've seen him in our lives, because they know first-hand, without any doubt, the difference he has made. The same is true for our church. We don't just want to be a place where people come and sing nice songs and hear messages filled with truth, we want to be a place where people *encounter the presence of God!* In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul tells the church to respond to the Holy Spirit in such a way that when unbelievers come to their gatherings, they are so overcome with the reality of God's presence that they fall down and say, "God is really among you!" Friends, if we want the presence of God to fill our lives and fill our church like that, we have to decide to give God the reins and prioritize his presence. It's *his presence* that makes all the difference.

The first word is presence - God promises to be with his people. The second word is scripture. Look again at what God told Joshua in verses 7-8, "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." Do you see just how important God wants his word to be to us, he tells us we are to meditate on it day and night, that we are to have it always on our lips, and not to turn from it either to the right or to the left. Meditate on it, talk about it, live it out. As God's people, if we want to take new ground and receive the promises and the inheritance he has in store for us, we have to follow the words he has given us. God calls us to read it, to meditate on it (to think about it over and over all throughout the day), to talk about it, to use it as our playbook, to honor it as the roadmap for our lives.

When I think about the Scriptures as a roadmap, I think about the summer after my freshman year in college. As a 19-year-old student, I got paired up with a few other undergrads and we traveled around the country to serve as counselors for high schoolers at 7 different camps. That summer we started out in Missouri, where my college was, and then traveled to New Mexico, up to Wyoming, down to Colorado, and then ended with a few weeks in Arizona before heading back to Missouri. On the team we each had certain responsibilities, so I was the treasurer who took care of the money, and I was also the map man. In 2004 we didn't have GPS systems or

smart phones, but we *did* have a huge book with maps of all the major highways in every state. And each Saturday morning before we packed up and left from one camp and traveled hundreds of miles to the next camp, I would spend time studying the map, plotting out the trip, finding the fastest way, and deciding where we would stop for food and gas. I would take out a highlighter and mark the route so that no matter who was driving or riding co-pilot, everyone knew just the right road to take.

God says his Word is like a roadmap to us, it is a light to our path. His Word tells us how to live. And here's the thing: we're not supposed to take any detours! We are to follow the highlighted line, do exactly as he has laid out! I don't know about you, but when I look back on my own life, I have never once regretted obeying the instructions of God in his word. I have regretted following my own gut, I have regretted following the crowd, there are even a few times I regret following the advice from trusted counselors, but never once, *never once* has God's word ever failed me.

Just like Joshua, God is inviting us to meditate on his Word day and night, to have it always on our lips, which means to talk about it with our friends and family and co-workers. I know that might seem a little hyper-spiritual and impractical at first. But it's really much more natural than you think. Think about a big sporting event, like the Super Bowl. I know we haven't seen sports in a long time, but it's pretty normal to talk about a game with friends before it happens - who you think is going to win, the strategy they might employ - you might even watch the game with friends, and then after the game you talk about it with friends. If we can do that with a football game or basketball game, why can't we do that with God's word?

My favorite way to try to do this is to read a chapter or two in the morning, and as I am reading, I ask God to highlight just one or two things for me to put into practice that day. I then write it down, pray about it, and then I wait. And almost inevitably, nearly every single day, a situation comes up with a colleague, a friend, a family member, a neighbor, someone in our church, where I am able to say, "You know it's funny you should mention that, because just this morning I was reading in the book of 1 Samuel, and here's what I felt like God was teaching me." And it applies so perfectly to the situation. When we read God's word, pray about it, and meditate on it, it opens the door for natural, meaningful conversations that allow God's word to always be on our lips. A few months ago, in our 317 series, we set forth Scripture as one of the priorities for our church. And as we said, "We want to delight in God's word and live it out on a daily basis." Just like God told Joshua: Be careful to obey all of it. Be careful to do everything written in it. If we want to inherit all God has in store for us, the pathway is clear and simple: Read, reflect, pray, talk about, submit to and delight in God's word!

So we've talked about presence, we've talked about scripture, and now finally, courage. This is the last point, but don't think it's of lesser importance. God calls Joshua to be strong and courageous in verse 6, then again in verse 7, then again in verse 9. And then, to wrap up the entire chapter God says again in verse 18, "Be strong and courageous." Four times in one chapter! Do you think God is trying to communicate something here?! The best definition for the Hebrew word is "doggedly courageous" or "tenaciously courageous." Think of a dog protecting their owner, think of a mama bear protecting her cubs. No fear. Willing to put everything on the line. That's what God was asking from Joshua.

Courage is a hallmark sign that our faith is not in ourselves, our resources, or our ingenuity, but rather in God. Courage has always marked God's faithful people. Think about the time when Jonathan saw 20 Philistine soldiers and instead of running away and hiding like everyone else was doing, they climbed up a hill and fought them all. By all estimations he was outnumbered, but the way he figured it, one plus God is always a majority.

Think about the time David saw a giant. For weeks, whenever Goliath appeared, the Israelites would cower in fear. The first time David saw Goliath and heard him utter blasphemous words David said, "I'll go fight him. I know God is with me. Goliath can come with sword and javelin and shield. I come in the name of the Lord." Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were willing to walk into a fire. Daniel was willing to be thrown into the lion's den.

Or when the Apostle Paul was told that his mission to preach the gospel could end up with him in prison, he said in Acts 20:23, "I know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." What might be the logical response in a moment like that? Lay low for a little bit of time. Take some time off for a little R and R until things blow over and then pick it back up next year. No! In the very next verse Paul says: "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

When God's people are living by faith, we are filled with courage. A few years ago I read about a study done with preschool age kids. Researchers observed them on a playground with no direct adult supervision and noticed what sorts of activities they were willing to do. Then they had their parents present, but standing at a distance. The kids were, every single one of them, willing to climb higher and attempt more dangerous maneuvers because they knew their mom or dad were there to help them if need be.

If that doesn't apply to this conversation, I don't know what does. If we think we are going through life all on our own, facing challenges all on our own, or that God is real, but he is a distant deity who rarely involves himself with our life and our affairs, we'll be cautious, timid, hesitant, afraid. But if we know that God is intimately involved in every detail of our lives, that he is with us and even living inside of us, that he has promised to do great things through us, we will walk with courage, we will attempt great things for God and actually see God move in our midst. Instead of giving up territory to the enemy, instead of just holding the line, we will take new ground.

Friends, that is what this series is about: taking new ground. God has things he wants to do in you and through you. God has things he wants to do in our church and through our church. We are not going to stay stagnant; we are not going to regress. We are going to take new ground! We are going to press into his promises and receive the inheritance he has for us.

The Israelites followed Joshua into the promised land, into their inheritance. Do you know how the name Joshua is pronounced in Hebrew? Jeshua. It means "God saves." Do you know how the name Jesus is pronounced in Hebrew? Jeshua. God saves. It is the *exact* same name. The first

Jeshua led the Israelites into the promised land. The second Jeshua, the ultimate Jeshua, leads us into all of God's promises.

And how does he do it? The first Jeshua used his sword to defeat his enemies in battle. The second Jeshua was willing to be defeated by his enemies, he was willing to be crushed and killed on the cross, but then on Easter morning, he *took new ground*. He crossed over from death to life, he won the greatest victory in all of history, and he imparts that victory to us, he offers us the forgiveness of our sins, he offers us freedom, hope and eternal life. The Israelites followed the first Jeshua into their inheritance. We get to follow the ultimate Jeshua into our inheritance.

As we follow Jesus, we are going to take new ground, but not because of anything we do ourselves. We are going to take new ground because we have a leader who God has raised up who goes before us and who has been anointed to fulfill his promises to the world. God's word says, "No matter how many promises God has made, they are all 'Yes' in Christ Jesus." Let's be as hungry and as committed as ever to receive those promises. Let's follow Jesus to receive them.