

“Our Family Tree: Joshua”

Let's start today with a question. You answer for yourself. There's no right and wrong answer, no one answer better than the next. It's more a matter of what you think.

Here's the question. What do you think? If you had to make a choice, what's more important in life, to be a good follower or to be a good leader? To follow someone in your life (worth following), or to be someone (with your life) who others can follow in theirs?

What's more important: a good follower, or a good leader? Having a good role model to follow, or being a good role model (for others) to follow?

Well, thankfully, in life, (as you know), we don't have to make that choice, at least not in having to choose one over the other. Following and leading, they are not (in any way) in opposition, and they're certainly not mutually exclusive. For most, (if not all of us), it's not a matter of either or, as much as it a matter of when and how. No matter who we are, there are times when we'd be better off to follow, as well as times (in life) when it's our turn to step up and lead.

Today we're in week seven of “Our Family Tree” sermon series, the halfway point in a series that's going to take us through the summer. We're looking at a number of the Old Testament characters (in the Bible), some of our spiritual relatives, from which we can learn a number of life-lessons.

The character we're taking on today is the person of Joshua. Joshua was one of the greatest leaders the nation of Israel ever had. (We'll talk about his leadership in a few moments.) He was also, before becoming a great leader, one of the best examples (we have) of what it means to be a good follower.

To get us going, before we get to Joshua (and his life), let's set the context for his life in the context of what God has been doing through some of the people we've been looking at in this series. And, as we do, keep in mind that God's perfect and completely functional work (and plan), were worked out (and carried out) through a not-so-perfect and less-than-functional group of people.

Take a look at the front walls, starting with Abraham and Sarah, it was the promise of a nation through which God would work to save his world. They had no children, but (in their later years) they had a son named Isaac.

Isaac grew up and was married, and he (and his wife, Rebekah) had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the oldest and had the right to the family inheritance and blessing...but Jacob was a deceiver and he ended up deceiving his father (and his brother) and receiving what was not intended for him to have.

From there, Jacob had twelve sons (and a daughter). The twelve sons would become the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel, through which God would (eventually) send his own Son, Jesus, to save the world.

One of the twelve sons (of Jacob) was Joseph. He was the favorite and the favored son of his father. The brothers were jealous, sold him as a slave, and he ended up in Egypt.

If you remember the story, after a series of events, Joseph ends up second-in-command, only to the Pharaoh himself. He oversees the saving and then the distribution of food during seven years of plenty that led to seven years of famine. After reuniting with his father (and his brothers), the family settles in the land of Goshen, just outside of Egypt, where the nation of Israel begins to grow.

Nearly 400 years later, a new Pharaoh is on the throne (who knows nothing of Joseph) and the history that had taken place. As a result, the Israelites become slaves to the Egyptians and that's when their (nearly 400 years) of bondage begin.

All of that leads to (last week's story) about Moses, the one God raised up to become the nation's deliverer. Through a series of plagues, ultimately through the final plague, the death of the firstborn, the Pharaoh finally relents and Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land of Canaan.

Now, take a look at the map (up front) and you'll see where they have been and what has been happening that leads to the story of Joshua. There's not a lot of detail, but (hopefully) you can see some of the highlights.

The nation starts out in the (upper left); you see the Mediterranean, (the land of Egypt), where they were slaves. From there, they follow the arrows across the Red Sea (and its parting) into the desert where (near the bottom) they end up at Mt. Sinai. That's where they stay (for about a year) and where God gives them the Ten Commandments.

From there, they travel north to where, (if they had been faithful), they would have been able to enter the Promised Land, but they were not. So, instead, they end up wandering (literally) in circles for another 38-39 years until that older (unfaithful) generation dies off and a new (more faithful) generation grows up.

Finally, after 40 years in the wilderness, up through Kadesh-Barnea, Moses' life comes to an end (at Mount Nebo), Joshua takes over, and God leads the nation of Israel (across the Jordan River) into the land he had promised to give them from generations before. That's the context and the (background) that leads to Joshua. I hope that helps set the stage.

Now, there are a number of things we could mention about Joshua's life. We're talking today about leaders and about followers. Let's start (with Joshua) as a follower, before he became the leader. He was not always the one up front. He started out as someone further back. Let's (turn it back) to about a year (or so) after the nation of Israel had left Egypt and was making their way toward Canaan.

God had promised (generations prior) to give the nation that land. It was a covenant he had made with Abraham (and his descendants) from the start. When it was time to enter the land (he had promised), God commanded Moses to send in a group of (twelve spies) to see what they were up against, and to bring back a report. And so they did. Joshua was (one of twelve) who went in to find out.

When they came back (with their report), ten of the twelve said there's no way. They said the Canaanites were too strong and they'd never be able to pull it off. Two of the twelve, Joshua and Caleb, offered a minority report. Strong? Yes. Too strong? No way. Not for God, not for a people (to whom) God had promised it would happen.

Nonetheless, the nation of Israel did not listen to what they said, (nor trust) in what God had promised, and so God left them to wander...for 40 years until that nation died off. Only Joshua and Caleb who trusted in God's word were permitted to go in.

From that point on, Joshua became an understudy to Moses. In almost everything that happened, (during those wilderness wanderings), Joshua was there by Moses' side. He watched him. He listened to him. He learned from his right choices and his mistakes. Before becoming a leader, he was first a follower. He followed Moses. He learned from (and listened to) Moses...who, in turn, followed and listened and learned from God.

Two other things (about Joshua's life) worth mentioning, before turning to some of the lessons we find. One, when Joshua finally took over (as the leader), he was a tremendous military leader. He was the one who (not only) led the nation of Israel into Canaan, but he was (also the one) in charge as they overtook the entire land.

That "walls of Jericho" story, (remember that?), marching around for seven days, on the seventh day, seven times (blowing trumpets); until finally the walls came down and the people rushed in and Jericho was destroyed...that was the first city taken by Israel. But it was just the start.

That same pattern continued for many years. God was bringing his judgment on an ungodly people. City after city, conquered and destroyed, little by little, Israel began to take hold of the land God had promised to give. Read through the book of Joshua and that's what you'll find. Joshua was a powerful military leader, leading the people until finally the land was theirs.

The second thing worth mentioning is that Joshua, while being a strong military leader, was also a strong spiritual leader. All throughout his life, that's what people noticed. At every turn (in his life), that's what Joshua did. He was faithful in following God. He was committed to doing what God called him to do. Even when it made no sense; even when the odds (against him) and Israel seemed too great; there was nothing too great for God to handle. If God commanded it, Joshua followed it. And in following God's commands, Joshua ended up as a strong spiritual leader.

Now, there's a lot more we could say about Joshua's life. Those are just a few of the highlights. As with each of the characters (in this series), I'd encourage you to go back and read through the story of Joshua's life. It's a powerful story. It's an inspirational story. It's a story of a follower (under Moses) who ended up as (a great leader) under God.

Let's talk about some of the lessons we find. We focused on three (last week) with Moses. Let's take on three from Joshua. And I'll give them to you in the order (in his life) in which we find them.

Here's the first. Joshua was a great leader. He was one of the greatest leaders Israel ever had. But before he became a leader, he was a follower. Before he was (given the ability) to lead, he needed to learn from someone who knew how.

Here's the first: Who we follow will directly impact what we become. Who we follow will directly impact what we become.

I came across an interesting study (this past week) from the Pew Research Center. It was a study on role models. It was talking about the way in which our lives are influenced by others and how our ways of thinking (and acting) in life are formed.

What caught my attention was a comment made that (for all of us), no matter who we are, we end up (in many ways) becoming "the average" (it said) of the five people we spend the most time with. On average, if I spend my time with you and you and you and you and you, then I'll start thinking and acting (on average) in ways that you and you and you and you and you think and act. The people we spend time with (it said) end up influencing what we become.

In other words, if I hang around people who are fair and honest and (try their best) to do what's right, odds are better that those same qualities will (end up being) part of my own life, than if I don't. If I spend time with people who are always in trouble, there's a far greater chance that I'll end up in trouble myself.

When it comes to the story of Joshua, he spent a good amount of time with Moses. And because he was (with Moses), he was probably hanging out with people Moses hung out with, who were probably good people themselves. He lived with them. He learned from them. He followed them...and in following them, (following Moses), he ended up learning what it means to lead.

Here's the deal. Every one of us is learning from someone. Every one of us (in our lives) is following someone. Who we follow directly impacts who we become. Who we spend time with has a big influence on how we think and act.

I have a long list of spiritual role models in my life; people who have influenced (in good ways) who I am today. I wouldn't be who I am today without having had those people in my life. I'm sure (many of you) could say the same.

What it comes down to is this: Who are you hanging out with? Who are the people you are spending the most time with? Who are your friends at school? Which colleagues are you spending time with at work? Who's your role model? Who are your role models? And I'm not just talking to the kids or the young adults (here today), but to all of us.

Who is the spiritual leader in your life? Who is the one (the ones) who are helping to shape your life. We are all being shaped by someone, by "someones." For Joshua, it was Moses. We all need a Moses. Who's your Moses? If you don't have one, it would be good to find one. Lesson #1: Who we follow will directly impact what we become.

Lesson #2: It is not the greatness of our faith that wins battles, but our faith in a great God. It is not the greatness of our faith that wins battles, but our faith in a great God.

This can easily become one of those areas in life where we get things turned around. Without even realizing (we're doing it), we start mixing up how this whole thing works.

We face a problem in life, a challenge in life, and we turn to God. We have some kind of battle (going on) in our life, an enemy, (if you will), where we need some help, and that's what we do. We turn to God. We ask for help. And we should. It's what God wants. It's what people of faith do.

Where we can easily get it turned around is when it comes to what (we think) actually makes it work. How does it work? Does my faith in God make it work, or does the God in whom I place my faith make it work? Am I able to face the battles in my life (because of the faith I have) in my life, or am I able to face the things (I battle with) in life because of the God who gives me help?

Joshua faced all kinds of battles in life. Some of them were physical, his enemies. Many of them were spiritual, times when he was tempted to take another route. What gave him strength was not (the strength) of his own (personal faith), but the strength of the God in whom he placed his faith. What enabled him to face the battles (day in and day out) was not the greatness of his (walk with God), but the greatness of the God with whom he walked each day.

Do you see the difference? (I want to be careful here, because it's all good.) But there is a difference. Don't turn it around. Next time you face a challenge in your life (or a struggle), some kind of enemy (or battle), where you know you need some help. Don't work to (gather up) a certain amount of faith to make it work, (wondering if you have enough), but work to gather (yourself up) and look to the God who always has enough. He's the one who can help. He's the one who has helped...all the way to the cross. And he always will. Lesson #2: It is not the greatness of our faith that wins battles, but our faith in a great God.

Lesson #3: It is not life's chances that make the difference, but life's choices. It's not life's chances that make the difference, but life's choices.

Now, we all know how it works in life. The chances (we each have) are not the same. Depending upon where we grew up, who was in our family, the kind of schooling we've had (whatever), life (for very one of us) has been different. The chances we each have are not the same. That's the way that it works. But the choices we have are much the same. The decisions we all face (in life) are not too dissimilar.

At the end of his life, Joshua offered the people a choice. After 30 years (growing up) in Egypt, in slavery under the Pharaoh; after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and learning how to lead (from Moses); and after 40 more years of leading the nation of Israel (into the Promised Land) and establishing themselves as a powerful nation led by God, Joshua's life was filled with chances. He had more chances (to do more things) than most of us will ever have.

But he wasn't (at all) concerned about our chances, about their chances. What he was (concerned about) and offered to the people was a choice. And, honestly, it was same choice he (and they) had faced for many years.

From chapter 24, after reviewing their history, all that God had done for them – his promises, his assurance, the covenant he had made and kept - here's the choice they were given. And it's the same choice you and I face every day. Here's what he said. (He said), "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you...(Do you think that happens today? Do you think people today serve and follow other gods?)...If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...(Every one of us makes a choice.)...But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

My friends, the chances (we each have) will be different. There's no question. Our lives are not all the same. But the choices we have are much the same...and every one of us will choose.

I'll speak only for myself. (That's all I can do.) After all God has done for us and has promised to us, after all he has given us in his Son, Jesus Christ...As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. How about you? Amen.