

Be Strong And Courageous

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to turn together back to Joshua chapter one. And so for the next half an hour or so, we will just think a little bit more about what this passage has got to teach us.

And we're going to read again at verse nine, where God says, Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous, do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

This is a very exciting week for us as a congregation. We are so delighted to welcome our friends from OM. We're so excited to be thinking about outreach work for the week ahead, and also for the rest of the year.

Our mission work as a church is not just the next six days, it's also the next six months, and all the years ahead that God will give us. We have a community outside around us, and our great desire is to reach them with the good news of the gospel.

And we love to do that work, and we're so thankful that this week, we have an opportunity to do more than we would normally be able to do. And so we've been looking forward to this week for a long time.

[1 : 11] As many of you will know, over the last couple of years, we've renovated our building. We've been working very hard to create an atmosphere that's welcoming and comfortable.

We've been planning, preparing, and praying hard for our community, and this week, we're gonna spend it going around our whole village, knocking on every door, sharing some resources, and inviting people to follow Jesus, and to come and be part of our church family.

And going on from there, we have Christianity explored, we have our youth work, and we have the connections that you all have with your neighbors, your colleagues, your friends.

We're all here week on week to do the work of God's mission. As we think about that, how do you feel? As we look ahead to this week, as we get ready to knock on doors, as you think about, well, who could I invite?

To Wednesday night, who could I invite? To Christianity explored, who could I maybe share a booklet with? As you think about maybe having conversations with Jesus, about Jesus, with your friends and family, as you think about who you might text to think, you know, would you like to come along to this?

[2 : 29] As you think about doing all of that, how do you feel? Well, if you're anything like me, you will feel weak and nervous. I feel weak, don't feel strong, and don't feel capable.

I don't feel like I've got lots of energy. I don't feel like I'm ready for conversations that might come, and if I think about picking up my phone this afternoon, I would rather be checking Olympic news than messaging people to invite them to come to things.

I feel nervous, not really sure what I'm gonna say. Anxious about how people might react, and I'm always worried that I'm just gonna make a mess of it.

So, there's a part of me that's absolutely delighted that we have the opportunity this week, and in the months ahead from mission work in our community at the very same time, there's part of me that just wants to run away and hide.

I feel weak and nervous, and for all of you here, whether you're part of the team, or whether you're just in a congregation, or whether you're serving in a church, in your own community back home, I am sure that is how you feel as well, when you think about the work of mission that God has given us to do.

[3 : 46] When we feel like that, when we look ahead with a sense of anxiety and apprehension about what God wants us to do in our lives, whether it's this week, or for whatever might lie ahead of you in God's plan, one of the best chapters that we can turn to is Joshua chapter one.

In this chapter, Joshua, who was leading the nation of Israel that had come out of slavery in Egypt, he is preparing for an even more daunting mission.

Moses has died, and the time has come for them to enter the land that God had promised to their ancestors. Joshua is the guy who's gonna lead them, and many battles, many challenges, and many threats lie ahead.

In that moment, God comes to Joshua with these wonderful words, be strong and courageous. And that's our title. Today, it's one of the most reassuring texts in the whole Bible, and what we need to always remember is that the reason God gives reassurance is because he knows that it's needed.

In other words, Joshua was not standing on the banks of the Jordan River, looking ahead to the mission that lay before him, thinking, I feel really strong. I'm ready.

[5 : 10] And God doesn't come to him and say, well done, Joshua, keep feeling strong, not at all. I have absolutely no doubt that Joshua was standing there feeling weak and nervous, and that's precisely why God comes to him and says, be strong and courageous.

And as we think about the work of mission that God's given to us this week, and for the rest of this year, and in whatever time God gives us in the years ahead, God is saying the same thing to us.

So I want us to unpack that a little bit more, and as we do that, we're gonna look at four things that this chapter teaches us, and they all begin with, oh, I'm not really an alliteration man, but I've managed to get alliteration today.

Our four points are omnipresence, opposition, obedience, and opportunity. We're gonna look at each one together. So first of all, here, omnipresence.

One of the great truths that's emphasized in verse nine is that wherever Joshua goes, God is going to be with him. And we'll see later on that at one level, that's a promise to Joshua that as he steps out into this daunting task, God is gonna accompany him every step of the way in a special way.

[6 : 27] But at the same time, one of the reasons why God can say this to him, I'll be with you wherever you go, one of the reasons why God can make that promise is that there is nowhere that Joshua can ever go where God is not present.

And that's what we mean by the word omnipresent, all present. God is present everywhere, and that's one of the key attributes of God that theologians identify from scripture.

Now, as we think about that, omnipresence, we can think about it temporarily, temporarily, and spatially, in other words, in relation to time and in relation to space.

So in terms of time, there is never a moment in the universe's existence when God is not there. Every millisecond of history is played out in the hands of God.

It's from him that it all originates. It's in his hands that it's all sustained. And in terms of space, there's no location that a human can ever go that's beyond the presence of God.

[7 : 35] And Psalm 139 is the great song declaring that, where shall I go from your presence? Where shall I flee, where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you're there.

If I make my bed in shale, that's a Hebrew word for the grave, you're there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

God is always present at every moment in every location. And that makes perfect sense from a biblical understanding of the universe. The universe depends on God completely.

The doctrine of creation tells us everything originates from him. The doctrine of providence tells us that everything is upheld by him. So whether you go to the tiniest subatomic particles or all the way out to the vastness of billions of galaxies, God is present everywhere.

So as Joshua stands at the Jordan River and prepares to travel a few hundred miles towards the Mediterranean Sea, he is definitely not gonna leave God behind.

[8 : 43] And it's really important that we have a good grasp of this attribute of omnipresence because it protects us against some misunderstandings of God that we can easily fall into.

We can easily think that God is confined. And we must not do that. So we must never think that God's presence is confined to certain areas or certain periods.

The idea that, oh, God's present here, but he's not present there, he was with us then, he's not with us now. That's not true, it's not accurate. In fact, that was the false understanding of God that was common among the other nations in the Old Testament.

And you'll see that at times in the Old Testament that sometimes people thought, oh, our God's are the gods of the hills and our God's are the gods of the valleys. And there was this idea that God was confined to a particular territory.

Our God is not like that. He's completely different. We mustn't think that God is confined. Nor must we think that God is spread out as though he's kind of like stretched thinly across the whole universe.

[9 : 39] So when you think of the vastness of the universe, you think, well, God is present everywhere, he must be stretched really thin, spread out in that kind of way. That's not what we mean by omnipresence. He's not diluted, he's not scattered or shared out.

Omnipresence is referring to the fact that God, the fullness of God's presence is there in all times, in all places. Now there's times in the Bible where you'll see that God intensifies his presence in special ways.

And in the story of Israel coming out of Egypt, you see that with a pillar of fire and cloud and you see it in other places throughout scripture as well.

In many ways, these moments in scripture where God's presence is in the pillar of fire or in the cloud, in the temple, in those moments, God intensifies his presence.

But all of that is within the context of the fullness of God's presence everywhere. And in many ways, it's maybe more the case, maybe more the case, that it's not so much that God's presence is increased, but that access to that presence is increased.

[10 : 47] Believe it or not, the sun is actually always there, even when the weather is terrible and we can't see it. And so on a sunny day, the sun doesn't become more present or more powerful, it just becomes accessible.

And that's maybe a wee bit of an illustration expressed in the same kind of idea. We mustn't think that God's spread out. We mustn't also, however, think that God is absorbed.

In other words, we mustn't think in terms of pantheism, the idea that the universe is divine and that God is somehow absorbed into the world around us. Omnipresence refers to the presence of the Creator within his creation, that distinction between Creator and creation must always be maintained.

So God is present everywhere because the creation is his, not because the creation is him, if you see the difference. And maybe most importantly of all, we must never think that God is distant.

It's so easy to think like that because so often it can feel like that. Sometimes God feels a long way away, especially when things go wrong, especially when things happen that we didn't want to happen.

[12 : 01] And other times we maybe want to try and keep God at a distance. And we think, look, I just don't want to have to think about God. But God is never distant.

He's always present. Every step you take this week and for the rest of your lives, he's there. When I was reading up on this, I read a wonderful quote from Augustine, who was a theologian who lived in the fourth and fifth century.

He said, to discover where God is, is hard. To discover where he is not, is harder. And I thought that was a very good quote, capturing what we're trying to say.

Omnipresence then reminds us of both the nearness and the beyondness of God. So his presence goes further than anything we can ever reach.

So there's no discoveries in the universe for God. There are millions for us, none for him. But his presence also reaches closer than anything else can ever get.

[13 : 03] So if you think of the deepest, most intimate, most personal depths of your heart, God will meet you right there. And all of this is teaching us an incredibly important point.

It's teaching us that God is inescapable. Now that's an astonishing comfort. It meant for Joshua that he was not going to take a single step without God being there with him.

And so this week, whatever you're doing, you're never taking a single step without God right there with you too. It's an astonishing comfort. But it's also a big warning.

It's also a very solemn thought because that word omnipresence is reminding us that God is never rejected from a distance.

In other words, he is always right there when you push him away. None of us can say God's miles away and he's not remotely bothered if I think about him or not.

[14 : 18] We can only reject him when he's right there in front of us. Another quote from Augustine, which I thought was very helpful, he said, we can never flee from him.

We can only flee to him. And again, that's why Augustine's a genius. He's got lots of great quotes like that. Okay, number two, opposition.

For Joshua, one of the main reasons why he needed reassurance was because of a lot of opposition that was going to lie ahead of him. There were enemies in the land, they were going to have battles, it was going to be dangerous and difficult.

But alongside those enemies that lay ahead of them, tensions were also going to arise within the community. And if you read on through Joshua, you'll find that a huge amount of their problems actually came from within the Israelite community itself.

And no doubt, even in Joshua's own heart, there was doubts, fears, struggles that would attack him. And what's true for Joshua is true for us. Opposition can be outside us, it can be among us, it can be within us.

[15 : 28] And so as we go with the gospel into our community, we may come across opposition. Now, I actually think it's very unlikely to meet people who are outright hostile and harsh towards the gospel.

That's very, very rare. But we will meet people who are hesitant, skeptical, and there will be many. There are many in our community who just struggle to see how Christianity has any relevance or importance to life today.

Whatever opposition we might face when we're going out with the gospel, it's so important that the church remembers a crucial thing. We must never forget that when we face opposition, our goal is not to beat them.

Our goal is to win them. In other words, you're not trying to win an argument, you're not trying to beat them and be smart or clever or anything. Your goal is to just invite them to experience the love and joy and peace that only Jesus can give and to win them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ serving together in his kingdom.

At the same time, I think all of us know that often opposition can actually come from within the church community rather than from outside. That's one of the big challenges that we face in the church here in Lewis now.

[16 : 45] As we try to reach out to people who've got very little connection to the church, one of the things that we need to explain to our community is why Christians have fallen out so often and why we're always dividing and even why here in Carlyway there's two churches.

We need to hold our hands up and say that that's wrong and that it shouldn't be like that and that our heart's desire, our longing is that these divisions would be healed and that we would all be one together as we should be.

In the Old Testament, Israel failed from the inside out. And church history repeatedly shows that external opposition just fuels the growth of the church.

What brings her down is departures from God's word within the church community. And this is maybe a hard thing for me to say and I've seen it to myself as much as anybody else, but we do need to say it.

We can do far more damage to the church as Christians than we actually can from the outside. And we've probably all made mistakes where we've judged people too harshly, where we've refused to forgive people who've hurt us.

[18 : 04] One of the amazing things about this week is that we've got Christians from all sorts of different backgrounds, all sorts of different churches, all sorts of different circumstances and stories, and we've all come together, united with one great goal to share the amazing good news of Jesus that unites us.

So there's opposition out there, there's opposition amongst the church community, but I think the greatest opposition all of us experience comes from within us. And as we look ahead to the coming week, I'm not really that concerned about what might lie out there.

I don't struggle to admit that Christians have made mistakes. What I really struggle with is the feeling that I'm going to mess it up and the feeling that I can't do it. In other words, my biggest problems are not out there. They're in here.

Doubts, fears, hesitancy, reluctance, anxiety. These are the biggest challenges and they all come from within.

If that is how you feel, you need to see that God does something absolutely brilliant in verse 9. In the midst of all the challenges and fears that lay ahead of Joshua, God does something wonderful.

[19 : 13] God talks about himself. And that is so important. He doesn't give Joshua a pep talk saying, look Joshua, you're not that weak, you're actually quite strong, you can do this. God doesn't do that. Instead, he says, I am with you.

I'm always with you. And that right there is the ground of all our reassurance, encouragement and confidence. Everything rests on God.

Our strength and our success all comes through him. Our hope rests entirely on him. Later in the Bible in Ephesians, Paul talks about taking up the shield of faith when we feel that we're attacked and we're doubting and struggling.

That's such a brilliant image, the shield of faith, because it's basically saying that when we feel under attack, our defense comes through what we believe.

In other words, when you're plagued with doubts or fears or insecurities about anything, you need to fight back with theology. You need to fight back with the great truths that the Bible reveals to us about God.

[20 : 20] So as we step into this week, as we step into the second half of this year, as we all strive to reach out with the gospel, we need to remember that God is omnipresent. He's with us at every moment.

He is omnipotent. He is all-powerful. He is omniresorbed. You won't read that in a book, that word, I just made it up. You know what I mean? He's got all the resources that we need. He's going to fill in all the gaps that we're going to leave.

It's so easy to think that opposition to the gospel is like a wall that has been built to stop the wind. And so you think, well, if there's opposition, it's going to stop the gospel.

Opposition is not a wall. Opposition is a sail. A wall stops the wind. A sail shows you just how powerful the wind really is.

Obedience. It's easy to miss the fact that Vershinae, in that she opens with the language of commandment, have I not commanded you?

[21 : 28] And that's set in the whole of this version, the context of obedience. Vershinae is stepping forward in obedience to God. Everything he's doing is following God's command. And that's reminding us that mission is always in the context of obedience.

In other words, mission work, whether that's this week or in any activity that we do as a church, it's always a response. We are not prompting God to do something.

He is prompting us to do something. God has commanded us to go and reaching out with the gospel is always in obedience to that command.

And that's so important because it's reminding us that in terms of reaching out with the gospel, you're not going to disobey God by trying. And even if it doesn't go brilliantly, you're not disobeying God by trying.

We are only ever disobeying God when we sit still. But in terms of obedience, if you look at Verses 7 and 8, you can actually see that there's three commands that are given.

[22 : 31] We're told to be strong, we're told to be courageous, and we're told to be careful. And that's our really important word for us to remember. As we go out with the gospel, we do that so watching over our lives, guarding our hearts so that every aspect of our lives is shaped by the gospel.

In other words, mission work is not just about having the courage to go out and knock on the doors of our community this week. Mission work is also about having the strength and courage to be different from all the sin and corruption and brokenness that we see in the world around us.

So some of us this week are going to need strength and courage to go around knocking on the doors in our community. But some of you are going to need strength and courage to resist the temptation to join in with gossip at work, or to actually refuse to cross the line of drinking too much, even if everybody else around you is doing it.

Having strength and courage to show kindness to the person that nobody else wants to be around. Having strength and courage to stay patient when the people that you're working with are driving you mad.

All of that takes a huge amount of strength and courage. Sometimes Christians are strong, courageous and careless. And that can leave us harsh with our words, hypocritical in our lifestyles, arrogant in their demeanor.

[24 : 08] None of that's going to help us in the mission that God has given us. Instead, our strength and our courage needs to be accompanied by a careful guarding of our lives.

There's also a couple of negative commands. Do not be frightened. Do not be dismayed. Time is racing on. Let me just say a couple of things about these very, very briefly.

Do not be frightened. I don't need to explain that to you. We need that command every day. Do not be dismayed is a really interesting command. The word dismayed, the Hebrew word, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, so it's a Hebrew word that's been translated into English.

Basically means to be broken. It can convey the idea of being shattered or demoralized, which is a very real feeling when it comes to mission work in Scotland in 2024.

It's so easy to feel demoralized. But we've always got to remember that God doesn't give us negative commands to tell us off. He gives us negative commands because it doesn't need to be like that.

[25 : 10] We do not need to be frightened and we do not need to be dismayed. And the more about, the more that we know about God, the less that we are going to feel that way.

And it's all reminding us that our moral never comes from our abilities or our achievements. It always comes from the unchanging reality of who God is and the fact that he's always with us.

So omnipresence, opposition, obedience, last of all, opportunity. Joshua is standing on the border of the Promised Land and he's standing on the threshold of an amazing opportunity.

The people have waited years for this moment. They've made a mess of things several times before in the time from when they had left Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Now the moment has finally come. This at last is their opportunity to enter the Promised Land. But the key point I want us to notice is that first and foremost, this is not an opportunity for the Israelites to do something.

[26 : 15] It's an opportunity for God to do something. As we mentioned earlier, although God is omnipresent, there are also ways in which your access to that present is intensified and that's definitely what Joshua is experiencing here.

In verse 5 we read, I forgot to put it up, verse 5 we read that he said, As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. So God's special presence is going to continue with Joshua just as it was with Moses.

That means that as they move forward towards the Promised Land, they are not going to demonstrate how capable they are. They are going to witness how capable God is.

In other words, this is not just an opportunity for Israel to prove, this is not an opportunity for Israel to prove what they can do. It's an opportunity for them to see just how much God can do.

And exactly the same is true for us as we engage in the work of mission that God has given us to do. So yes, at one level, mission work like this week and other things that we're doing, they're an opportunity to do something wonderful and it is brilliant fun to just get stuck in to work, whether it's this week, youth work, Christianity explored, stuff that we do at Christmas, whatever it might be.

[27 : 37] It's great fun to do these things, it's a joy and a privilege to be part of it, but most of all, it's an opportunity to see all the wonderful things that God can do.

And that's incredibly important for us to remember. Sometimes reaching out with the Gospel, inviting friends to church, trying to share the good news of Jesus can feel like an obligation, and sometimes it feels like an unappealing one at that.

The truth is, mission is an amazing opportunity. An opportunity to serve together, an opportunity to connect with the people around us, an opportunity to see more of how utterly amazing God is.

So, Joshua 1.9 has got a lot to teach us, it's got a lot to encourage us. All these truths are echoed by Jesus in the words that we read at the start of our service.

He is sending us out with His Gospel. He has promised to be with us every step of the way. As we conclude, I just want to say a word or two to anyone who's here, who's maybe not yet a Christian, or who's maybe not sure about the Gospel, or kind of questioning the whole thing, or just wondering, so whether it's anyone here or anyone watching at home who's maybe just not really sure, or maybe you're like, I am sure, and I'm not interested, maybe that's how you feel, I don't know.

[29 : 11] What I want you to see is that all of these O's apply to you. Omnipresence, God is right here, and He's calling you, and He wants you to follow Him.

He's waiting for you. And Omnipresence tells you that He's waiting for you at home as well, and He's waiting for you at work or at school tomorrow.

He's right there. He's calling you. I am sure that the devil is trying to throw 101 not-knows into your mind right now.

Not-know, it'll spoil this, it'll affect this, it'll change this, not-know. Or this may be a whole ton of other ways that He's putting opposition into your mind, maybe you're thinking, I'm not good enough, I don't know enough, I'm not ready, I've made too many mistakes in my life, or whatever.

There will be that opposition, don't listen to it. Don't listen to it, because none of that matters. None of that matters. None of that matters.

[30 : 40] We must remember the obedience that God is looking for. He's not looking for obedience in terms of you being a super good person, keeping this rule, that rule, do this, do that, that you know you have to stop doing this, stop that.

That is not what the Gospel is all about. That is legalism, and as a heresy, it's not the Gospel at all. It's never been the Gospel. The Gospel is about trusting, but that trust is an act of obedience.

Faith is an act of obedience. The Gospel is an invitation to accept, and it's a command to obey. God is saying to you, please trust me and follow me.

Please obey Him, please say yes. And last of all, opportunity. Right now is the moment that matters.

The past does not matter, and the future is entirely in God's hands. We don't know what any of it is going to bring. Right now is the moment that matters.

[31 : 48] Right now is the opportunity to do the best thing that you have ever done. And that's the amazing thing about the Gospel. Every single person here who's lived on the island for years, many of us grown up here.

Some people here have come, have never been to Scotland before, and they've come from all over the world, speaking a whole ton of different languages, from a whole different set of cultures. We all have one thing in common.

We can all stand up today and say, the best thing that I have ever done is to put my trust in Jesus. And today you've got the opportunity to do that.

Amen. Let's pray.