

October 6, 2013

OUT OF THE WASTELANDS

Joshua 1

INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago the *Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled “The Truth About Being A Hero.” In it Karl Marlantes related a story of being a second lieutenant leading 40 Marines in Viet Nam at the age of 23. His platoon was assigned to take a hill the North Vietnamese Army troops occupied. Before the attack US planes were to pound the hill with bombs. They hit the wrong hill, so when Marlantes led his men out of the jungle to attack the hill they immediately came under withering machine gun, mortar and rocket fire. The enemy positions were unscathed since the air raid totally missed them. The Marines dove for cover trying to escape the deadly fire and their attack stalled completely. Marlantes, the young officer leading them, knew if they stayed there they would be destroyed in place. He said, “I did a lot of things that day...but the one I’m most proud of is that I simply stood up in the middle of (all) that flying metal, and started up the hill...I simply ran forward up the steep hill, zigzagging for a bunker all by myself, hoping my own men wouldn’t hit me in the back.” As he was rushing up the hill he caught movement in his peripheral vision. Fearing an enemy was attacking on his flank he glanced that way and found it wasn’t an enemy soldier at all, but one of his Marines, off to his side and a few meters down the hill, running, zigzagging, charging up the hill following Marlantes’ lead. Behind that Marine was a long line of Marines moving and weaving up the hill.

One could say Lieutenant Marlantes knew if he did nothing he and his men would surely die so he did the only thing he could do that had a chance of success, and that was to attack. That may be true, but it still took an enormous amount of courage to stand up in the face of that barrage of lead. When I read stories like that I wonder if I could do that or if I would just cower behind whatever cover I could find and try not to wet myself. Fortunately we likely will never have to find out, but we will have to face things that scare us. All of us will. In fact, if we are to live as God wants us to live and the way we want to live we will have to do some scary things. We will see this today as we look at Joshua 1.

JOSHUA FACED DIFFICULT CHALLENGES

The context of this story is that Israel, the people of God, are now standing just outside the borders of the land of Canaan. They had been there before. The history is familiar. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for as long as any of them could

remember. Then a fellow named Moses, a former adopted member of Pharaoh's household, showed up after being off herding sheep in some backwater area near Bakersfield for decades. He said God had sent him to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The idea seemed absurd, yet God was indeed with him. After a series of dramatic miracles Israel did escape Egypt.

But where were they going? Since the days of Abraham God had been promising to Israel that an area hard by the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea would be their home. It was known then as Canaan. After a couple of months in the wilderness and a few battles along the way to prepare them Moses led them to the border of Canaan. There they balked. They were intimidated. They saw no way to defeat the people who were already living there. It was hopeless. They refused to act on God's promise and go into the land. So God sent them back out to the desert where they spent the next 4 decades.

In time the generation that failed at the border of Canaan died out and their children were now adults. This new generation of Israelis now was being given the opportunity to succeed where their fathers had failed. But there was one fly in the ointment. The great leader they had followed, the greatest prophet Israel had before Messiah, had just died. This left poor Joshua with two very difficult tasks. The first was to take over the leadership of Israel. What a daunting task that was. How do you replace a man like Moses who had spoken with God face to face and demonstrated miraculous power on repeated occasions? That's a job immeasurably more difficult than becoming the basketball coach at UCLA after John Wooden retired or the football coach at Alabama after Bear Bryant retired. Or maybe being the guy who will have to replace Nick Saban at Alabama after he retires? Those are big shoes to fill, but they are tiny compared to the sandals of Moses.

The second difficult task was not just heading up the nation but leading them on a daunting military operation. God said he would see to it that they would be able to defeat the people who lived in Canaan. His power was the guarantee, not their power or military ability. Unfortunately they couldn't see God and they could see the people in Canaan. They were all too real and the potential battles they faced were also quite real. Would this new generation, which hadn't seen the parting of the sea, be able to take on the fearsome task that was too much for their fathers?

WE ALSO FACE DIFFICULT CHALLENGES

Israel longed for the land God promised because it was a land of abundance. It was going to be their permanent home. All they had known was slavery and then mostly aimless wandering in an area that was a barren, inhospitable wasteland. The

idea of their own homeland, a place where they would not be nomads, where there was water, where they could own land and grow crops was a dream.

This is where this historical episode intersects our lives. God has promised his people today, including us, a land as well. It is also a dream. It is the thing that every human heart longs for. And just like Israel lived in a desert wasteland before they reached the Promised Land so we live in a wasteland right now.

Wait how can you say this life is a wasteland? This life has some aspects to it that are wonderful and beautiful. Parts of this life are immensely appealing to the senses. We recently had a baptism at the beach. The day was glorious. Being on the beach with the sun going down was glorious. There is music so lovely it touches you at a place too deep for words. There are smells and tastes that are delicious. More important there are people that we love so deeply that it is as though they are a part of us. They are a source of indescribable joy. How can you describe a place with so many wonderful things, so much beauty, a place filled with so much joy and wonder, a wasteland?

The Bible tells us that compared to God's kingdom this world is a wasteland where we are never at home. As long as we are in this age our hearts will always ache for the home we were made for. God's kingdom will have some similarity to this world but there will be something very different about it. There will be no "but" about it. You all know Laurie and I love Hawaii. To us it is paradise. Uh, yeah, about that paradise. Two weeks before we went a person was attacked by a shark there and severely injured. That was the eighth shark attack in Hawaii this year. That's your idea of paradise? A number of years ago David Drake was there and had a seriously unpleasant encounter with a jellyfish. In this world there is always that something, that threat of unpleasantness that can range from something as serious as a shark to irritants like mosquitoes. So we get a sense right there that our true home will be a much better place than this one.

However there are some other realities that come into play when we think about the difference between this age and the one to come. In fact the Bible says that this world is worse than a barren wasteland compared to God's kingdom. It is barren but it is also dark and dangerous. This is because it is a spiritual wasteland. This can be seen in three ways.

Disconnectedness From God

Widespread in humanity is a sense of hollowness, emptiness, a sense that something is missing. People sense that something is off. Something is not quite

right and there is this constant hope that they will figure it out. What is off is humans themselves. The Bible calls it sin, but there are a number of terms for it. Evil, distortion, wrong. This wrongness in us produces a couple of effects. The first is that it causes us to be disconnected to God. It also produces a sense of shame and guilt. We don't want anyone to know the dark secrets we hide.

We were made to be connected to God. If we do not have that connection something will always be off in our souls. We will sense that something is wrong, something is missing. There will be wonderful joys, but in the end they will be fleeting leaving us with a longing for something we can't quite define. That something is to have a close connection with God. It is our greatest need. Even when we have the connection with God through Christ that we long for it is not the full, face to face experience that we were created for and that we will experience in God's eternal kingdom. As long as we don't have that we will sense that lack.

Damage To Other People

This wrongness in us produces a boundless amount of damage to other people. I have witnessed this in so many contexts. The last night of our vacation Laurie and I went to one of our favorite restaurants. As soon as we were seated I heard someone say, "Rick?" I turned around and saw at a table close by Gary and Linda Plambeck with Linda's son, CJ. More than 2000 miles from home we ended up seated a few feet from some people from our church! We joined them and had a wonderful evening. But they told us a story that just amazed me. They had gone to see a blowhole called the spouting horn. A dozen or so tourists were there, but a couple of locals were down by the blowhole kind of ruining the picture for those wishing to take snapshots. One of the tourists, a man from Las Vegas, rather abruptly and rudely asked the guys to move away. This led to some angry words between the local and the guy from Vegas. As the Plambecks were getting in their car to leave all of a sudden the local showed up and grabbed Gary's car door and said, "Not so fast, Vegas." Gary said, "I'm not from Las Vegas, I'm from San Diego." The guy had wanted to fight, but realized he had mistaken Gary for Las Vegas. He apologized but then went on a rant about the blankety blank tourists. Isn't human nature lovely?

Yesterday I had to go to our cable TV company to exchange our cable box because ours had died. I waited for a half hour to get assistance and got to watch human nature manifest itself. One guy was clearly unhappy even though the technician patiently helped him. He disagreed over the cause of some of his problems, but eventually the technician gave him some new equipment and instructions how to

use it. He had told him how to activate it, but as the man started to walk away he said, “make sure you activate it according to those instructions or it won’t work.” This apparently hit on a sore point because the man turned around and angrily barked at the guy that activation would be fine if their cable company could somehow manage to not foul up everything they did. The technician showed remarkable aplomb. Rather than arguing with the guy he said, “You have a nice day, sir.” As he walked out the door he went right by me and I heard him mutter, “You have a nice day” and addressed it to the guy using an obscene swear word to refer to him. Behold human nature in all its glory.

One of our neighbors just put new sod in her front yard. Immediately a brown spot showed up where someone's dog did its business and killed the grass. She put a sign up that read "please keep your dog off the grass." The next day she watched as a woman walking her dog brought the animal to the sign and calmly stood there while the dog relieved itself on the sign. Welcome to the human race.

There is a wrongness in us that is the source of all of this conflict and strife. **The worst hurts you will experience in this world will be inflicted on you by other humans.** Children have their little souls deeply wounded by their own wounded and distorted parents. Kids inflict enormous pain on each other, spouses live in a state of war with each other or give up and divorce, friendships blow apart, business partners sue each other, racism is rampant everywhere in this world. Romans 3 says "the path of peace they have not known." The relational pain we encounter in this world is immense and is an evidence of the arid spiritual wasteland nature of this world.

The Pervasiveness Of Evil

One last factor that causes this world to be a spiritual wasteland is the presence of an evil force at work here. We have a very real enemy who does not want merely to defeat us. He is truly evil. He enjoys our pain so he wants to torture and torment us until he finally destroys us. He seeks to fill our lives with discouragements, disappointments and hurts. He tries to get us to believe lies so that we do not see the truth that will produce life and joy. Haven't you ever wonder why life has to be so hard and so perverse at times? This is part of the reason.

This is not the land God's people were promised. Our promised home is a spiritual land of milk and honey compared to this wasteland. It is a land of abundance, security, joy, utter satisfaction and peace. In this land all those negative elements of the wasteland will be gone forever. There will be no disconnection from God. Gone will be the shame, the guilt, the lostness and emptiness that are inevitable

with disconnection from God. All the damage that we inflict on each other will be done. This land will not be full of the relational turmoil and pain of this world. The wrongness in humans will be healed. We will not be obsessed with ourselves and as a result will hurt others, instead we will live only to bring love and blessing to them. We will no longer hurt each other. Imagine how you would ideally like to be treated and that is how people will relate to you at every moment in that kingdom. Everyone of us will have a sense that we belong, that we are wanted and that we are valued. Our evil enemy will be defeated so he will no longer be inflicting torment on us. This land is the eternal kingdom of God. Can you imagine never feeling overlooked or unwanted, never experiencing disappointment, shame or guilt? That is our promised land. God is going to give it to us.

Yes, but doesn't that land come to us as a gift by grace? Joshua is a book about fighting battles and conquering to gain the land. What does that have to do with us and the land we have been promised? There is an important truth that is easy to either not know or to forget. Yes the total fulfillment and experience of that great kingdom is yet future for us. And we will receive it as a gift of grace. But it is crucial for us to know that **even now God wants us to begin living out the life of his kingdom**. Our lives are to look like a little taste of that kingdom. In us people should see evidence of that kingdom of love, joy, kindness, grace, peace and real living connection to God.

But in order for us to experience that and manifest it we will have to fight to enter that land in this world just as Joshua and Israel had to fight to enter into what God promised them. Fighting is hard and scary. But understand this: we only have two options. Option one is to fight the good fight in order to enter right now into the land God promised us. Option two is to stay in the wasteland and live out our lives there. There is no other alternative.

GOD GAVE DIRECTIONS FOR THE PROCESS

Be Courageous

In verse 6 God says to Joshua, "be strong and courageous." Again in verse 7, "Be strong and very courageous. Then in verse 9 you see it again. "Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged." The chapter ends with "only be strong and courageous."

Why the repetition of that message? Did God start to say something to Joshua but didn't plan it out well so he kept repeating himself? No, God knew that this was a key point. It was the crucial point for the nation because it was precisely the issue

for the previous generation. They were terrified and discouraged, so they gave up before they ever even tried to enter into Canaan. In Hebrew repetition indicated emphasis, so God was emphasizing the need for courage. I don't think Joshua was intimidated. He was one of two spies in the previous generation that believed they could conquer the land. God intended the nation to hear this message. They were the ones who most needed courage. But we need it too.

We know that following Christ can be terrifying for Christians in much of the world. In January 2006 Kamil Kirglu, a 29 year old Christian in Bursa, the fourth largest city in Turkey, was attacked by five men. They threatened him and tried to force him to deny Jesus and become a Muslim. When he refused they beat him. They beat him into unconsciousness twice before one of them pulled out a butcher knife and threatened to kill him if he did not deny his faith. He refused. Fortunately he survived the incident. Afterward he said, "I am praising God not because he saved me from death, but because he helped me not to deny him in the shadow of death."

We hear these stories and shudder. They sadden us. But they seem far from us, don't they? Maybe not so far. It is becoming increasingly apparent that following Christ is going to become more difficult and costly even in this country. Even now most of us have failed Jesus at one time or another because of fear. We have had an opportunity to tell someone about him or be identified as a follower of Jesus and have stayed silent simply because we are afraid. It is a problem with a long history. Poor Peter, the most vocal of the apostles, fell prey to it the night Jesus was arrested, causing him to deny the Lord he had sworn he would never fail.

But there are other ways we can become fearful and discouraged that will keep us from the life Jesus wants us to live. I think it is common for Christians to fear telling God that they will give him everything that they are and everything they have. We fear taking risks of all kinds. We fear that we might face serious trials.

We almost certainly will not have to stand up in the middle of a storm of flying bullets, rockets and shrapnel to attack fortified positions. But we do need to have the courage to trust God even in the darkest of times, to not abandon faith, to obey him when it will be costly. **Any move you make to obey God, to live his kingdom life will be opposed! You will have to fight.**

1 Corinthians 16:13 says, "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong." There's that same message that Joshua heard. Be strong, be courageous. The actual Greek text didn't say "be courageous." That was a

translation of one Greek word, *andrizomai*. It is the verb derived from the noun *andros*, which meant “a man.” The verb means “be a man.” This doesn’t just apply to men. It is merely using men as an example of a truth. We know that a man *should be* strong and courageous, not cowardly. A man should stand up for what is right, he should protect the weak and powerless, he should be willing to give himself up for his noble cause and not be dominated by fear. This principle applies to all of us, regardless of gender.

The thing that keeps us from boldly following God is fear. What do you fear? There are things you are afraid of. It may be taking some risk, it may be trusting God when things get hard, it may be saying what you really think when you know it is needed. One of the biggest will be saying no to self. In the end the choice between trusting and following God and disobeying him comes down to saying no to self, being willing to sacrifice self to do God’s will, and taking care of self in whatever way you deem necessary. It is frightening to us to give up what we want, to give up self-protection, self glorification or self indulgence and just serve God. But you need to see yourself as standing on the border of the promised land. The way in is to say no to self, do the scary thing. Will you have the courage to do it?

Most of us, though, have a tendency to think, “I’m no hero. I’m just not person who has a lot of courage.” That’s because we think of courage as sort of not feeling fear or feeling some upwelling of strength while under pressure. God gave Joshua a command. We all got the same command in 1 Corinthians 16:13. There is a fundamental truth about a command, and that is that it can be either obeyed or disobeyed. In other words, we have a choice about whether we obey it or not. We can choose whether we will be courageous nor not.

Being courageous does not mean not feeling fear. Having courage means feeling the fear but choosing to act anyway. I guarantee you that when Karl Marlantes stood up in the middle of that firefight and charged up the hill he was afraid, but he chose it anyway. What we need to see here is that God’s will for us is to be courageous. It is to choose to have courage. That means admitting our fear, but choosing not to let the fear win.

Live By God’s Truth

A second key for us shows up in verse 7. “Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left.” In verse 8 God said, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.”

There is an enormous question that we all face. That question is what will guide my actions? What will determine what I think is right and wrong? What will tell me what choices I should make? Joshua and all of the people of Israel, like all humans, had to have answers to those questions.

People outside of the nation of Israel had no knowledge whatsoever of God's Law. But they did have ideas about what is right and wrong and about what they should pursue. Those ideas came from their own religions, their culture, or just their own personal ideas. By the measure of God's Law many of those ideas were not just wrong, they were abhorrent. Joshua and his people were going to encounter those ideas and they had to decide what was going to rule their lives. Would it be God's Law or would it be the kinds of things other people were thinking?

The message of this passage is that Israel's success would be directly tied to their commitment to letting God's truth rule in their lives. Verse 8 says that the result of doing everything God said in his law was "then you will be prosperous and successful." The path to success was directly through God's Word.

Many people today want to turn that into God's formula for prosperity in the physical sense. After all, that was clearly what it meant in Joshua's day. Do my will and you will gain the land I've promised. You will have plenty. So some today say if we just do God's Word we will have prosperity. We will succeed in everything we attempt. But that kind of thinking overlooks a crucial truth that we have already identified. These verses are a visual aid, they were intended to give a visible picture of a spiritual truth. As long as we keep that in mind we will be accurate in interpreting this verse.

That means that the key to experiencing **spiritual success** is following God's Word, not turning to the left or right from it. If we will do that we will be spiritually prosperous and spiritually successful. In other words, we can experience the life that God intends for us, the lush spiritual life of plenty that was pictured by the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

God promises us spiritual prosperity, and though we find it hard to believe this is what we need more than the physical success that we all think we want. It is a life connected to God, a life of peace and joy and hope and love. At the end of the day what do people want? They need hope. They need love and they long for peace.

I was thinking about this passage on our flight to Hawaii. We had a crazy weekend the day we left, culminating in doing church Sunday morning, then driving to LA,

boarding a plane and enduring a 5.5 hour flight that evening. When we landed we were exhausted. We gathered our luggage and went to the rental car agency to be confronted by a line about as long as the Great Wall of China. I endured that line that moved at a glacial pace with increasing impatience. I finally reached the front of the line. There were 3 agents helping people at the counter, 2 of whom had just started the process. The third agent was helping a woman who had already been there for a good 15 minutes. This is a process that should take no more than 5 minutes. I could overhear her conversation with the agent, who was discussing the options for fuel for when she returned the car. The agent explained the 3 options. The woman didn't understand, would she explain them again? The agent did. The woman still didn't understand the first one. Explain that again. The agent did. Then the woman said, "I don't understand how that's different from the second option." The agent explained that. The woman proceeded to ask the benefits and deficits of each option. I felt this rush of impatience, disgust and anger welling up inside me. I wanted to just shout at the woman, "Are you brain dead? This is not that hard! You are an idiot. Just make a choice would you!" It was at that point that this passage I had been thinking about came to mind. Is there anything in God's word that relates to this situation? Well, let's see, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience..." Uh, yeah, but what does the Greek word translated patience mean? Doesn't it mean patient except when you are dead tired and there is a person who is as bright as a refrigerator bulb in your way? Sadly, no it doesn't mean that. We are commanded to love people always in every situation and then told in 1 Corinthians 13 what love is like. We love that passage. We read it at weddings. Have you read it? Do you know how it starts? Love is...what? Yeah, love is patient, love is kind. But I don't feel like it right now! So what is going to rule your choices?

This issue of doing what God commands is a crucial turning point in life. Do you want to enter the land, or do you want to wander out in the wastelands the rest of your days? If you want to enter the land meditate on God's Law, that means put it in your head and heart, then do it.

Remember God Is With You

At the end of verse 9 we get the best promise of all. "Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Imagine how important that was to Joshua. Israel had survived the Egyptian army and other battles because God fought for them. He had parted a sea for them. He had provided water in a barren desert for them. He had provided food miraculously for them. He had guided them through the desert wanderings with visible symbols. Moses had conversed with him personally on many occasions.

But now Moses is gone. What was Joshua to do? He was to be strong because though Moses was gone, God was not. God would be with them just as much as he had been every step of the way with Moses. Nothing that really mattered had changed. If God was the deciding factor in all the trials they had faced, and he was, and if God was still with them, did that not mean that in all upcoming trials the deciding factor would still be in the favor? That's exactly what it meant.

We want this to mean that since God is with us everything is going to go the way we want, nothing bad is ever going to happen to us. If we just obey God we will win always, we will have the perfectly smooth life. Let's be clear, that cannot be what it means to have God with us. If that were the case the book of Hebrews would not have been needed.

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of persecuted Christians who were ethnically Jewish. Their lives were hard, full of opposition, ostracism, rejection and hardship, much of it precisely because they believed in Jesus. Some of them were struggling, wondering if life wouldn't be a lot easier if they just forget this Jesus business. The book was written to encourage them to do just what Joshua needed to do, to be strong and courageous and stand firm. In Hebrews 13:5 the writer tells us "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" They were following Christ, and what came was hardship and persecution. The apostles all experienced severe persecution and difficulty as a result of following Jesus. So God being with us does not mean life will be easy. Then what does it mean?

It means that you will never be alone, God will be strengthening you if you trust him, he will comfort you in tough times, he will give you hope, he will bring good out of all that happens, he is working his plan in life. It means he is for you, and in the end your life will be a win. I heard an athlete being interviewed recently and he was asked about some of the disappointments he had dealt with. He said, "Everything happens for a reason." Yeah, the reason is that this life is hard and everybody is going to have a share of the pain of this life. But for a follower of Jesus everything does happen for a reason. We can know that because God is with us. It means that there is indeed someone with you looking out for you and caring for you at every moment of your life. We can know that we will look back and see that there was meaning in all that happened and that our life was a win. I think of two people with an unusual similarity, both of whom exemplify what I am talking about. One is Dave Dravecky, the former major league pitcher. He developed cancer in his pitching arm. After undergoing treatment for it he came back and wrote a book about his experience called *Comeback*. But the cancer

wasn't done. It showed up again and he had to have his arm amputated. He wrote another book, *When You Can't Come Back*. It told of his difficulty dealing with his new reality, but in the end he said through it all God was with him and enabled him to keep going.

Laurie and I were just on the island of Kauai, and that reminded me of the second person. It was Bethany Hamilton, who also lost her left arm in a shark attack while surfing off the north shore of Kauai. Bethany testified to the same thing, that despite the tragedy and difficulty of her experience God was with her. This is the real source of courage for us. We know we can stand because no matter what happens our God will be with us.