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WHEN THE BIG GUY SHOWS UP
Joshua 1:6-9

When we were on vacation one day we were sitting in the shade under a tree on a beautiful lawn, looking out at the beach. We decided to go for a swim in the ocean so we got up and headed for the water. Unfortunately Laurie was distracted and wasn't paying attention to where she was going. She walked right into a low hanging substantial limb of a plumeria tree. She banged her head pretty good and it hurt. I checked her head to make sure she hadn't cut it. There was no cut, but there was a pretty good knot on her head already. She needed to get some ice on it, so I went to the bar by the pool that was not far away to see if I could get some. I explained to the bartender that my wife had bumped her head and needed some ice, and asked if he had some. The bartender asked, "How did she hit her head?" I didn't really want to explain this, but figured I wouldn't get any ice if I didn't. So I said, "Well, she wasn't watching where she was going and she hit her head on a tree." The bar tender said he would call for security who would bring an ice pack. The security guy finally showed up, checked to make sure she didn't have a significant head injury and gave her the ice pack. He agreed that the particular limb was something of a hazard to navigation. There was even brief talk that maybe the tree needed to be cut down. He went away for a few minutes then came back and said, "The incident was caught on two security cameras. Sure enough, you just walked right into that limb."

The rest of that week, Laurie was not only leery of that tree, which we referred to as the Killer Tree, but she would occasionally admonish me to be careful of trees when we were walking. You could never tell when you might be unexpectedly attacked by some vicious tree intent on doing you harm. Oddly, our last day there I missed banging my head on the same limb of that same tree by about 2 inches.

Neither Laurie nor I was really afraid of trees, but we were aware of them after that and we steered clear of them. It has occurred to me that life can be a little like that. We go through life and periodically bang into things, or get banged by them. We get hurt, and we may not call it fear, but we become leery. The truth is, leery is another word for fear and there's lots of things we might fear in this world.

We are sending off the Smiths because the Holy Spirit has made it clear that this is what he wants. As I thought about their leaving I found myself drawn to Joshua 1.

It is a passage that is about entering the unknown. It has a message for the Smiths, but it also is a message that is pertinent to all of us.

JOSHUA FACED A DAUNTING CHALLENGE

Israel had been led by Moses, the greatest leader and prophet in the Old Testament, for more than 40 years. He had faithfully led them through countless difficulties, many of them perilously life threatening, and through him God had worked miracle after miracle. But now Moses had died, and Joshua was being given the responsibility of taking over that leadership. What an intimidating task!

Joshua's task would have been difficult even if he were not the successor to one of history's greatest leaders. He had to lead a large people group who had a strong propensity for making life difficult for leaders. To add to the fun he was going to have to lead them on a military campaign that had a high probability of epic failure. Israel was poised east of the Jordan River, ready to begin its attempt to conquer the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. But that was no easy task. There were a number of different people groups already rooted in the land, and those people groups were for the most part fairly war-like, battle hardened people.

Israel, on the other hand, had minimal military experience. And they had already failed at this task once. Some 4 decades earlier they had been in the same position. God had told them to go in and defeat the people living in Canaan and take possession of it, and they said, "We can't do it." They were intimidated by the people living there and said they felt like grasshoppers compared to those mighty warriors.

Nate and Melissa don't face a situation as daunting as that, and neither do we. But for them, and for all of us, there are always going to be more than a few things that we are leery of. There is a lot to be afraid of, a lot that can intimidate us in this world. I see parents at times who are almost in a panic over how they will ever be able to raise their kids to be safe, healthy and godly. They go into helicopter mode and it just makes things worse. I see young people fearful of the commitment of marriage. I see people living in fear of the future due to climate change, fear due to the increasing hostility toward followers of Jesus, fear due to the rapid moral deterioration of our society, fear of taking a stand for Jesus.

We might fear that we can't really represent Jesus in a cogent way because we are just not godly enough, or maybe that we will seem stupid because others are so much smarter than we are. We went to Toby's graduation from medical school 2

weeks ago. It was obvious that the people he was graduating with are light years smarter than me. Listen to the titles of some of the projects they did. “Astrocyte Activity Modulated by S1P Signaling in a Multiple Sclerosis Model.” “The Molecular Mechanisms of MAP4K3-Mediated Autophagy Induction.” What?

We followers of Jesus are so few, such a small minority. There are many who are smarter, more powerful, more influential, richer than we are and who look down on us. We have so little power. It can cause us to live afraid, to withdraw, hide, and fear we can never do anything significant here.

JOSHUA WAS COMMANDED TO BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

In verse 7 as Joshua faced this challenge God said to him, “Be strong and very courageous.” Not just be courageous, but be very courageous. If that weren’t enough, in verse 9 he said, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid.” Well, yes, you did command that. But that business of being strong is a problem. I’m not. We kind of think strength is something that sort of happens to us. If it didn’t happen to me then how am I supposed to be strong?

But notice God’s question in verse 9. “Have I not commanded you?” That’s kind of a crucial point. Yes, he did command. And it makes no sense for God to command something that we have no control over, that happens to us whether we choose it or not. So whether Joshua was strong and courageous was up to him. Whether we are strong and courageous is up to us. We have a choice. The fact that God commands means we can choose to be strong and courageous.

This is not about never feeling fear. Courage can only exist in a context of fear. We need courage to do something when we are afraid. I don’t need any courage to make up my bed in the morning. I have no fear of my bed. To be courageous means to feel the fear, but to choose to not be controlled by it, to act in spite of its presence. You don’t have courage, you choose it.

God commands us to move into the world with courage, to take on each day with bravery, to not be intimidated by anything that is before us. In 1 Corinthians 16:13 Paul wrote, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.” The ancient church leader, Tertullian, said in the second century, “The Lord...wants those who belong to him to be brave and fearless.”

Unfortunately life hands us defeats and inflicts pain on us to the degree that we learn there are lots of things to fear out there. In fact, as we get older we tend to become less courageous. I have read that young men's brains in particular don't fully develop until they are around 25 years old, and the last part that develops is the part that governs judgment. In other words, young men tend to think they are indestructible and as a result are prone to do inherently risky things. As they get older they begin to get more cautious. That's a good thing, I suppose. It's called prudence. But it also means caution tends to trump courage as we get older.

Pastor and writer, Francis Chan, was asked why he spends so much time ministering to young people. He said, "Because they still believe that God can do anything and live like it." When Israel first came to the border of Canaan they sent 12 spies into the land. When they came back they reported it was a great place. But 10 of them said there was no way they could ever defeat the people who lived there. Only 2 of them said that they could win because God was with them. One was Joshua, and the other was Caleb. 45 years later Caleb said in Joshua 14:11 after pointing out that he was 85 years old, "I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out. I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said." The Anakim were the people Israel was so afraid of. Now, at 85 years old, Caleb said, "Let me take them on. I am as ready as ever, and with God helping me I will go and defeat those people." That's what I hope to say if I ever reach 85. With courage I want to be able to say with Caleb, "let me at 'em."

JOSHUA HAD REASON TO BE COURAGEOUS

The difficulty is that somehow it doesn't always solve our problem to just say, "Be strong and courageous." Where do we get the courage that we may not have in our own personal toolkit? We should get it the same place Joshua did.

Note carefully what the Lord said in verse 9. "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." There is a crucial word in that verse. It is a little word that we don't usually take much note of, but here it is crucial. It is the word "for." Why be strong? How can we be courageous? How can we not be discouraged and afraid? The word "for" says there is a reason. It is that the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

When Israel was poised at the border of Canaan 40 years earlier that was the crucial point. In Numbers 13:31 the majority report of the spies was “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” But in Numbers 14:9 young Joshua said, “Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

The Lord was telling Joshua, you were exactly right back then, so remember that and remind the people of it. You don’t need to be afraid because I will go with you. It is true that those people are stronger than you. If all that is factored in are the human elements then you will lose, and you’ll lose big. But those are not the only factors. I will go with you, and those people are not as strong as me.

Courage and strength for Joshua came from one reality. God would be with him and God would come through. I am not smarter than other people in the world. I do not have more resources than others do. I am not stronger than so many other people. We followers of Jesus are much in the minority and often discounted or even despised. I do not have much control of things in this world. But here is the truth I have to remember. God is with me and will never leave me. ***Courage is going to come from one idea. God will come through. I will have courage in life to the degree that I believe that is true.***

A couple of weeks ago I was talking to Nate about how things are working out as they prepare to move to their new location. He told me what was going on and I was amazed at how the details have fallen into place, how God was working out some things in unusual ways. Nate said, “I just need to have greater faith. I get caught up in the circumstances and fret over how things will work out. I just need to trust that God will work it all out.” He had just seen God work out things he had gotten a bit “concerned” about. I knew exactly what he meant. Why do I get fearful, tied up in knots, stressed out? Because I don’t believe God will come through. I lose track of the fact that God is with me.

This does not mean that God will always make everything go the way I want. But it does mean that God is always there, he is always with us, he is always at work, and he is greater than any obstacle or foe. So we need not fear. We can be at peace, and we can have courage, no matter how daunting any situation might be. We will have courage to the degree that we believe in our hearts that God will come through.

John Ortberg wrote in his book, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat*, that one day he and a couple of friends were walking down a street in Newport Beach when a fight spilled out of a bar onto the sidewalk in front of them. Three men were beating up one man, and he was bleeding quite profusely. He wrote, "I have not had much experience with that sort of thing. I missed the day that my seminary class covered how to break up barroom brawls... Breaking up brawls is not a strong area of spiritual passion or competence for me." But he said that someone had to do something, so he spoke prophetically to the 3 men and prepared himself for his first fistfight since he had been part of a deacon board.

To his surprise, the three tough fighters looked up with fear in their eyes, stopped, and began slinking away. Ortberg says he was shocked at their meek reaction. Then he looked behind him. Standing there was one of the biggest men he's ever seen. He said if Xena the princess warrior had married Hercules this guy could have been their child. He stood 6 feet 7 inches and had to weight well over 250 with what appeared to be 2 % body fat. His muscles had muscles. He was the bouncer from the bar. He didn't say a word. He just stood there with his muscles bulging, and that was all it took. It was clear that breaking up fights was his spiritual gift. Ortberg said that with the sight of that huge man his attitude was transformed. He shouted, "That's right, run away! And you'd better not let us catch you hanging around here again." He said he and his friends began referring to that huge man as Mongo, though not to his face. He said they were different people because Mongo passed by. They had a Mongophany. His presence filled them with confidence. His point, of course, is that knowing that God is with us should make us different people. He goes with us, and he has all the strength we will ever need. So his presence should fill us with confidence.

