

Introduction

How do you feel about change? Do you like it, do you hate it or are you not bothered? I guess our reaction to change be it good, bad or indifferent will vary from person to person. Nevertheless any change can be difficult, it can feel awkward and will often involve a time of adjustment and often new learning before we reach a point of feeling comfortable.

With that in mind try this. I'd like you all to cross your arms. It feel pretty comfortable doesn't it - that's because you have always crossed your arms that way. Now try this...cross your arms the other way around. The chances are that feels a bit awkward and perhaps even uncomfortable (unless you are ambidextrous). That's because I have imposed a change upon you. It's likely that if you kept folding your arms the other way you would in the end get used to it and begin to feel comfortable again. The fact is even if we embrace change and find it exciting it is still challenging and can often feel a bit awkward.

Bear that in mind as we approach a New Year because at the start of a New Year it has almost become tradition to seek change.

- "I am going to change my diet".
- "I am going to change the way I exercise"
- "I am going to change my lifestyle" etc.

And then usually within a month or two we are back to our old habits. Let's face it - we find it difficult folding our arms the other way.

So change can initially feel really awkward and uncomfortable but if you are a follower of Jesus you are challenged to change in accordance with God's will.

For example in Ephesians 4:20-24 we are encouraged to put off our old self, which is being corrupted by deceitful desires; and to be made new in the attitude of our minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. When God wants us to change it is very worthwhile but that doesn't necessarily mean its easy - we have to work at - and crucially work at in God's strength and according to His instructions. So as we look towards to a New Year firstly perhaps it is best to simply accept that we know we are going to be experiencing change. Whether we like it or not we are going to have to leave 2008 behind and move forward into 2009.

So are we getting ready for 2009, how do we feel about a New Year? Do you feel strong and full of courage about the challenges that potentially face you? Or maybe you're feeling a bit apprehensive, a bit worried and rather concerned about what the future holds. Whatever situation I hope that as we unpack our reading this morning you can take heart from what God says to us through His word.

In Joshua 1:1-9 we witness God's people experiencing enormous change and with it the promise of more change to come. Joshua and God's people are metaphorically at the start of a New Year looking forwards. As we look at this passage we will in effect be looking backwards and looking forwards and discovering how this helps us to:

1. Trust in God's promises
2. Follow God's commands

As we start to do this let me ask you - how good are you at trusting in other people's promises? I say that because sometimes we are not that good at keeping them. A few weeks ago I promised to pick my daughter Lorna and her friend Steph up from Scouts at 9:15 in the evening. I was really engrossed in the football when at 9:30 my phone rang. "Dad where are you?" And what about following commands? I don't know about you but when someone says to me Gordon "you should" or "you ought" to do this or do that my natural response is to think "no I jolly well won't" even if deep in my heart I know that I "ought to" or "should do" this or that! There is an exception - if Ruth tells me to do something I do of course always do it! I'm not that stupid!

So with all this in mind lets start to look at...

1. Trusting in God's promises

Try to imagine this situation - At the beginning of our reading we discover that Moses the leader of the Israelites is dead, that of course brings with it huge change. Immediately God's people are now facing another change. For the last 39 years they have wandering in the desert and a new generation has grown up. Now they are camped along the bank of the Jordan River at the very edge of the promised land when God gives this momentous command to Joshua and tells him and the Israelites to 'Get ready' as verse 2 says.

2 "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.

There is an interesting parallel here: Are you ready to cross over into the New Year and answer God's calling upon your life?

At this time of year we have a tendency to look back and assess where we are and resolve to make changes - changes which will lead to success in the New Year. But we must first realize that true success is not what the world thinks of you and what you have done, but what God thinks of you and what you have done. The book of Joshua is a book of new beginnings for the people of God. Joshua had some very big shoes to fill. He was facing one of the greatest crisis points of his life. He was not only facing the challenge of replacing Moses as the leader of the nation but also of actually leading the people into the promise land. But Joshua trusted in God's promises and by the same token so should we.

Look at verse 3, 4 and 5 where God says this to Joshua: **3** I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. **4** Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates-all the Hittite country-to the Great Sea on the west. **5** No one will be able to stand up 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.

In the same way we should look forward trusting in God's promises. We may not have God speaking to us quite so directly as he spoke with Joshua but as a follower of Jesus you can be confident of this "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" - which of course is a promise from Jesus at the very end of Matthew's gospel. Jesus continues to be with us today through the Holy Spirit. So as you prepare to move forward into the New Year remember that God is with you - but that doesn't mean to say everything will be plain sailing. Yes we need to trust in God's promises knowing that God is with us but we also need to follow his command.

2. Follow God's Commands

Joshua knows his facing a daunting task, having scouted the land forty years before he knows what awaits the children of Israel across the Jordan River. In directing Joshua to lead His people the Lord commands him three times to be "strong and courageous" in facing this task. This is not idle encouragement as there are solid reasons for Joshua to trust God in taking up this challenge, the same reasons which support us in our walk with the Lord. Look at verses 5 & 6.

1. God had promised this land to the descendents of Abraham and it was Joshua who was to lead the people to take possession of what God had given them.
2. God commands Joshua to be strong and courageous in leading the people forward because of His promise.
3. We can take strength and courage in our Christian walk for the very same reason because of God's faithful promises.

For example let me just remind you of three of them:

1. What do we discover in John 3:16? Jesus promises: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
2. In Matthew 6:31-33 Jesus commands ...So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
3. In John 14:1-3 Jesus commands and promises us: **1**"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. **2**In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. **3**And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

The way to eternal life, though unseen, is secure - as secure as your trust in Jesus. He has already prepared the way to eternal life. We can look forward to eternal life because Jesus has promised it to all who believe in Him. So as the New Year approaches look back at what God has promised, look back at what he has done and then look forward and follow his commands. But of course this means that we have to play our part in this.

When God commanded Joshua to lead His people into the promised land he wasn't saying "just nip over the River Jordan and you've made it - you've arrived, so relax, put your feet up and take it easy". Like Joshua we haven't arrived yet. We are still on a journey and there is work to do.

Okay - you might be sitting there now and thinking - "Well that's fine Gordon - yes I see that I need to trust in God promises and follow his commands to seek his Will for my life - but how do I do that?" What practical steps can I take?

Take a look at verse 7 & 8 from our reading: **7** 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. **8** 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. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

In terms of the context of how this affects us it is very simple. Firstly understand that the "success" that Joshua was promised does not necessarily translate into prosperity as the world judges such things. One may be successful in God's eyes and not necessarily be prosperous in the eyes of the world. Material prosperity as defined by the standards of the world is not what is being promised here but success by God's definition is inevitable when we live out our lives under His commands.

Secondly this is saying to us today to read our Bibles, mediate on it and live out what it says. But unfortunately there is a problem. When it comes right down to it, most Christians know a lot more of the Bible than we are applying. It is not that we do not know what is right; the problem is this (and I know it applies to me) that we don't always do what is right.

Basically the message here is very simple indeed as John 14:15 says "If you love Me, you will obey what I command". Joshua is told to stay on the straight and narrow, not turning to the right or to the left. In the same way God expects us to do His will as He wills, not as we will. Not adding to or taking away from what He has commanded. But recognize this isn't easy - none of us is perfect and as we discovered with our arm folding exercise - even simple change can feel difficult and uncomfortable.

You see this really does take effort. Take another look at verse 8: 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. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Clearly, Joshua is called upon to include the word of God in his daily life.

Well here is a challenge for 2009 - If we are followers of Jesus and are seeking to follow God's commands it seems imperative that we include the word of God in our daily lives. So does that simply mean read your bible every day? Well 'yes' but it's tougher than that.

What about this word "meditate"? Meditation means to think about or contemplate how to apply the word in your life. Meditation has application as a goal. It is only when the word of God gets into our minds and affects our normal day to day decision making that we begin to act differently. So do you read your Bible daily and then meditate upon it? If you don't then perhaps try it. Are you now thinking "there's no point in me trying that because like all my New Year's resolutions they fail after a few weeks"? If that's the case let me just try and re-assure you. As sinners, separated from God, we see his law from below, as a ladder to be climbed to get to God. Perhaps you have repeatedly tried to climb it, only to fall to the ground every time you have advanced one or two rungs. Or perhaps the sheer height of the ladder seems so overwhelming that you have never even started up it. In either case, what relief you should feel to see Jesus offering with open arms to lift you above the ladder of the law, to take you directly to God!

Once Jesus lifts you into God's presence, you are free to follow his commands - out of love, not necessity, and through God's power, not your own. You know that if you stumble, you will not fall back to the ground. Instead, you will be caught and held in Christ's loving arms. So take strength and courage from the knowledge the LORD your God is with you as verse 9 says: **9** Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

You see strength and courage is required in the Christian life (vv. 6-7, 9), because being a Christian is not an easy option. We are called to live a distinctive life which the rest of the world will often find alien. Therefore we have to work at it and recognise that true strength and courage is actually supplied by Jesus through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

Summary

So let's begin to try and sum this up. Today we've heard about Joshua leading the Israelites and moving forward at God's command into the promised land. He led reminded of what God had done in the past and trusting in the promises God had made about the future. But as Joshua moved forward God also commanded him to be strong and courageous knowing that things were going to be tough and challenging.

So to succeed - yes he had to have faith in God and trust in God's promises but to keep going it was essential that he also obeyed God's book of the law. And that meant not just reading it but meditating upon and then applying it to the way he lived his life out. In the same way as we move forward into the New Year we need to ask ourselves if we are trusting in God's promises - that if we believe in Jesus we are saved, forgiven and receive eternal life. If that's the case then are you following God's commands and putting your trust and confidence in Jesus and putting him in charge of your present plans and eternal destiny? Are you reading, meditating and living out God's word? Because believing is both trusting in the reliability of his word and relying on him for the power to change.

So as we look back over 2008 and then look forward towards 2009 remember God will grant us His success and prosperity if we follow the advice of Joshua, doing what is commanded in God's word, holding His word in our hearts and mouths, and meditating on His word day and night and knowing that through the grace and sacrifice of Jesus Christ we are already accepted, forgiven and His children.