

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### A new beginning

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning, and Happy New Year!

I wonder if you've made any New Year's resolutions? Perhaps like me you find it hard to keep some of them. Many of us make plans to lose weight and get more exercise, but within a week or so those resolutions become hard to sustain!

For me, the New Year always gives me more energy for the year ahead. After the rush and tiredness of the Christmas season, it's great to enjoy some time off, relaxing with family and friends. There's a sense of the past year gone, and the fresh possibilities of a clean slate to write on.

At the start of the year I often think about the words of God that introduce the Bible Book of Joshua. These words remind us of what God has given to his people to equip us for new beginnings. In a moment, let's reflect on that Bible passage and find encouragement as we face this New Year.

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At the commencement of this New Year let's consider the introductory words in the Bible Book of Joshua. For Joshua, this was a time of new beginnings. The Lord had led his people Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and for 40 years through the desert. Now the Israelites were on the edge of the Promised Land of Canaan, just about to go across the Jordan River.

It was an exciting time, because their arduous journey was over. They had arrived at the inheritance the Lord had promised them to live in. But it was also scary, because Moses their leader, had just died. Joshua was now to be the leader of God's people. The implication in these opening verses is that Joshua was scared and felt unqualified for this huge task.

The first thing the Lord does is to re-assure Joshua that God has **promised** this land to his people. In Joshua 1 verses:1-3 God says '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 them – to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.'

We can only appreciate how re-assuring this promise to Joshua was when we consider what it meant to Joshua and Israel that Moses had died. Moses was their great leader, for over 40 years. He had led them through the desert and taught them God's ways. Moses was incomparable. Imagine how dismayed Joshua and Israel must have been with Moses' death. What do you do when *the* servant of God dies and a raging river lies between you and the land you're to inherit?

It's against this background that the Lord reminds Joshua that God's promise continues. Moses may have died, but God's promise lives on. There's the passing of an era, yet the endurance of the promise. The

Lord's faithfulness doesn't hinge on the achievements of humans, however gifted they may be. His good intentions don't evaporate in the face of sad tragedies or raging rivers.

As you enter this New Year, perhaps there are things that went wrong for you last year, and they are still on your mind. Maybe you were hurt or disappointed. As you look into this New Year, perhaps you're afraid about what might happen or a challenge that lies before you. Joshua felt the same way. God promises you that if you have faith in the Lord Jesus he will fulfil his good intentions for you. God is utterly dependable. His promise is that he has a new beginning for you that's under his loving and wise control. That's great encouragement as we enter a New Year.

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This morning we're preparing for this New Year by looking at the opening words of the Book of Joshua. The Lord speaks to Joshua, who is to lead God's people Israel into the promised land of Canaan. Joshua felt threatened by the challenge of what lay before him.

After reminding Joshua of God's promise to Abraham and Moses about the land, the Lord assures Joshua of God's **presence**. The Lord says: 'As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.' (that's Joshua 1 verse 5). It's interesting that similar words of assurance had once been given to the great Moses. When Moses knew God was calling him to the task of facing both Israel and the pharaoh of Egypt, the Lord had said 'I will be with you' (Exodus 3:12). The same God now gives the same assurance, in similar threatening circumstances, to Joshua. Yes, Moses has died, but the Lord hasn't changed. He's still the mighty Lord, the gracious God who is present with his servant and his people to help and deliver.

It's because of this assurance that the Lord can challenge Joshua to 'be strong and courageous' (vv.6,7,9). Joshua is not told to grit his teeth and screw up his courage on his own; he is to be strong only because the Lord is with him, and not because God prefers leaders who are positive thinkers. This assurance that the Lord is present with Joshua is repeated to him many times throughout the Book of Joshua (2:24; 3:7,10; 4:14; 6:27; 10:14,42; 13:6; 14:12; 21:44; 23:3,10).

A contemporary Christian might see this and say that's all very nice for Joshua, but he was a famous character; he had to lead all of Israel. What about the plain Christian like me? Is this promise for ordinary Christians? The answer is: a very definite yes! In Hebrews 13 we read this promise: 'God has said "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."' So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid."

Here the promise of Joshua 1:5 is applied to a Christian congregation. The promise of God's abiding presence is also for you, which leads to the great freedom of a life without fear! There is nothing more essential for the people of God than to hear their God repeating to them amid all their changing circumstances, 'I will be with you' or 'I will not forsake you.'

What a comforting assurance for you and me if we are following the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus said to his disciples, after his resurrection and in the last verse of Matthew's Gospel: 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). As we enter this New Year, with its mix of exciting opportunities and scary uncertainties, isn't it great to know the Lord's presence will be with us to guide us, protect us and strengthen us for the challenges!

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God's servant Joshua faced a new beginning. Moses the leader had died and Joshua was to be the new leader to help God's people enter the promised land of Canaan. Joshua felt sad at the death of the great leader, Moses. He was also worried about how he could possibly meet the challenges ahead. The Lord reminded Joshua of God's promise of the land, and God's presence that will go with Joshua. That's the kind of reassurance you and I need as we face the challenges of this New Year.

In these opening verses of the Book of Joshua, the Lord reminds Joshua of something else God has left Joshua to fortify him for the task ahead. It is the precious gift of the **Word** of God. Joshua is to (v.7): 'Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you.' The Lord explains to Joshua how God's Word can help him obey God: 'you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it (v.8).' The term translated 'meditate' is literally 'mutter' – meaning we are to read, ponder, speak aloud, and repeat the precious words over in our minds.

If we want to live in a way that pleases God and obeys him, the key is constant, careful absorbing of God's Word in the Bible. Lack of reading and listening to the Scriptures leads to lack of obedience. This command is given specifically to Joshua as the leader of God's people. Is it a command also for every Israelite and every Christian? Yes, it is! In Psalm 1:2 every godly believer is to delight in the Lord's law, and in his law we are to meditate day and night. Yes, God's Word must be our delight! A life pleasing to God does not arise from mystical experiences or warm feelings or from a new gimmick advocated in a new book; no, it comes from the word God has already spoken and from obedience to that word.

As we think about New Year's resolutions, what could be better than a plan to read and meditate on the Bible every day this year? You could read an Old Testament psalm each day. Or you could work your way through one of the Gospels and read half a page each day. I find it very helpful to read through the whole Bible each year, which means 3 or 4 chapters each day. There are plenty of booklets in Christian bookshops that provide Bible readings and guide us in understanding God's Word. After you have read the Bible passage, meditate on it and ponder how it applies to your own life. Take one verse you have read, write it down, carry it with you, put it on your desk in front of you as you work, and reflect on it several times during the day. Let me encourage you, too, to attend a local church regularly this year, so you can listen to God's Word read and taught.

If you, in this New Year, give serious attention to a Bible passage each day, the Lord will give you the strength and courage he expected of Joshua.

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A New Year is a new beginning. As Joshua faced a new beginning, the Lord said to him: 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go' (Joshua 1:9). The Lord assured Joshua that God has not left his people – or us – as orphans; we always have God's promises, God's presence, and God's Word. And that should be enough for us as we face the uncertainties and challenges of a New Year.

Let me pray for you: 'Lord God, thanks for your goodness shown to us during the past year. You have been faithful and merciful. Forgive us for our failings. As we commence this New Year, may we confidently rely on your promises, your presence, and your Word. May your Holy Spirit enable us to be strong and courageous, to live as faithful followers of Jesus. Amen.'