

Taking Hold of God's Promises

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Part II

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In Part I of this teaching article we examined God's promises and instructions given to Joshua in the first 9 verses of the Book of Joshua. These promises were that God would give the Israelites every place they set their feet, that no one would be able to stand up against them, and that He would never leave them nor forsake them. God then told Joshua to be strong and courageous in all he would do to take the land. Finally we noted that part of God's battle plan for Joshua and the Israelites was that they were to obey all of His laws, they were to not turn to the right or left, they were to not let the Book of the Law depart from their mouths, they were to meditate on it day and night, and they were to be careful to do everything written in it. Then God assured them that they would be prosperous and successful. (See Joshua 1:7 and 8)

The Fight

So the first chapter of the Book of Joshua gave him his battle plan. As he prepared to enter the promised land he knew that there would be strong opposition from the peoples who lived there. We too, when we prepare to move into the promises God has given us, know there will be opposition. Let's now look at four natural events from the Book of Joshua from which I draw spiritual parallels. I will relate each of these events as a spiritual principle. I think these four principles cover the majority of the resistance you and I will encounter as we begin to enter into and apprehend God's promises.

Barriers Opposing the Promises

Barrier One - Natural/Personal Handicaps

All Israel was camped on the east bank of the Jordan. God appeared to Joshua and gave him instructions to take the people across the river. But in Joshua 3:15 we are told that when God gave Joshua the order to cross the Jordan it was at flood stage! That means the river was perhaps seven to ten meters deep and possibly half a kilometer across!

Why didn't God wait until the water level was at its lowest? I believe that God wanted to show Joshua and the people that the only way they were going to get across the Jordan was by His supernatural intervention. When we see how the Jews got across the Jordan, there can't be any doubt in anybody's mind that no man was able to pull off that feat. It had to have been God.

The morning that Joshua commanded the people to break camp and prepare to cross the Jordan, this is what happened.

"So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground." (Jos 3:14-16a,17 NIV)

How do you think those priests felt when they first realized that they were to pick up the Ark of the Covenant and start across that flooded river? Sure, Joshua had told them that as soon as they stepped into the water, the water upstream would stop and stand up in a heap. But it still took great faith and courage to follow this new and as yet untested leader, Joshua. Those priests no doubt realized that they could have drowned if Joshua was wrong.

But they believed and obeyed, one step at a time. I think this flooded river represents the natural and personal barriers we see ahead of us when we look to the fulfillment of God's promises. I'm sure at least some of those priests wanted to just sit down and wait until the river stopped flooding. That's the "sensible, logical" thing to do, isn't it? But that's not what God wanted. He wanted His people to experience a supernatural miracle which only He could have produced.

Joshua understood that because he told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you." (Jos 3:5 NIV) And that's exactly what happened. The same holds true for us today. When we believe and obey, God does do amazing things among us!

I will tell you a true story I heard a couple of years ago from a pastor. This pastor had grown up with a terrible stammering problem. It was very hard for him to speak because he stammered so badly. As a result, he never wanted to talk in front of people. It was embarrassing for him as well as being very hard. But one day the Lord told him that he should begin to

teach a Bible class. This man waited and God kept confirming it. The man tried to argue with God saying no one would even come because everyone knew he stammered so badly. Finally, the man decided he would obey God and announced that he was starting a Bible study although he himself believed no one would come. The first evening a few people did come and the man began to speak. As he opened his mouth to speak, the stammer left him and it has never returned! That man is now a full-time pastor of a growing church.

God gave this man the same battle plan we have outlined from the first chapter of Joshua. And as this man was faithful, his natural handicap notwithstanding, God brought him through to his promised land. But note, God did not promise the man ahead of time that if he would be obedient and begin a Bible class, then he would be healed. No. God just told him to begin to teach the class. Then all those present got to witness the amazing thing that God did!

Now just think what would have happened if that man ultimately decided he just couldn't do it. What if he concluded in his own mind that his stammering was too big a handicap and he didn't start the Bible study? I suspect that that man would still be stammering today and, if so, he surely would not be a pastor.

How many promises do we miss on our walk with Jesus because of the natural and personal handicaps that stand between us and the promises of God? Too many, I fear. It's time for us to believe, obey, and watch God do amazing things in the midst of the natural and personal handicaps we face.

Barrier Two - Human and Demonic Opposition

So now we have Joshua and all the people across the Jordan. The next obstacle they encounter is the walled city of Jericho. I believe that Jericho represents for us the human and demonic opposition we will encounter as we move into the promises of God. To briefly tell the story of Jericho, God told Joshua to have all the armed men march around the city once each day for six days. They were to have seven priests carry trumpets of rams horn in front of the Ark on each march. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times and the priests were to blow the trumpets. When the people heard the

trumpets, they were all to shout. The account tells us that when the people shouted, the walls collapsed, the fighting men went straight in and the Israelites took the city and all the treasures it contained, killing everyone within the walls.

As we examine this story, the first thing that comes to mind is how seemingly silly God's instructions were to Joshua. I am a retired Marine and I can tell you that fighting men would not be impressed with simply walking around the enemy's fortress once each day for six days with a group of priests in the procession. These men would complain and grumble among themselves, saying they were tired, their feet hurt, Joshua was crazy, and on and on. In other words, God's instructions to Joshua didn't make any sense to the natural mind.

In truth, the weapons God gave Joshua and the people weren't natural weapons anyway. No natural weapon the Israelites had could even begin to penetrate the walls of Jericho. So they had to use supernatural weapons! And supernatural weapons are every believer's secret weapon in the supernatural realm. We know our fight is with principalities and supernatural powers, don't we? So of course we should use supernatural secret weapons given us by the Lord to defeat our enemies. That just makes sense. We may not understand it, but if we use these weapons, we can just believe, obey, stand and shout as the people did before Jericho, and see the walls come tumbling down!

I will give you an example I heard several years ago. There was an old, large building in downtown New York that was up for sale. It was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars but because it was in a bad part of town, it would be sold for less. A group of inner city Christian brothers went to the sale to try to buy the building for their ministry. A cult group showed up at the sale and began to out bid the Christians. The cult had more money than the Christians did and, in the natural realm, they would have gotten the building. But at one point, one of the Christian men stood up, pointed his finger at the cult group, and said, "The blood of Jesus is against you!" From that point on no member of the cult team could utter a word! They tried but they simply could not speak. The Christian group ended up buying the building at a greatly reduced price! If we would only believe and

obey, we too can stand and watch the amazing things God does.

Barrier Three - Human Sin

Now let's look at what happened to Joshua after he conquered Jericho. The next place to be conquered was a small town called Ai. I believe Ai represents for us today that unconquered sin in our life that stops the flow of God's supernatural power as we attempt to move into His promises.

Ai was so small that Joshua sent just a relatively few fighting men to conquer it and, to everyone's shame, they were defeated. When Joshua heard of the defeat, he fell before the Lord and said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!" (Jos 7:7 NIV)

My, how things have changed! Is this the same Joshua who declared to Moses and all the people that they could defeat all the giants in the promised land? Joshua is discouraged, isn't he? In fact, he sounds down right defeated and ready to give up, doesn't he? After all, he had just come from a mighty victory over Jericho and now a small group from Ai have defeated him.

But let's look at how the Lord responded to Joshua's cry. God said, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it." (Jos 7:10,11,13 NIV)

Notice what is happening here. Joshua has been defeated in battle and he is discouraged. He tore his clothes, fell on his face in prayer and stayed that way until evening which means he was fasting, too. (Jos 7:4) God responded to Joshua's cry by telling him to get up and take care of the sin in the camp! In other words, God wasn't particularly impressed with Joshua's praying and fasting. The Lord didn't tell Joshua that because he prayed and fasted, God would give them victory from now on. Now, the prayer and fasting wasn't necessarily wasted. It made the way for God to talk to Joshua and show him the sin in the camp. But once Joshua knew of the sin, he was to get up on his feet and go take care of it.

If you have personal sin in your life, and by that, I mean an ongoing, lifestyle sin area in your life,

you can fast and pray for a month and God isn't going to give you what you want. He will tell you to get the sin out of your life. He will show you how to do that, and He will give you the strength and grace to get the job done. But, by this example from the Book of Joshua, I believe with all my heart that we will never really come into the promises the Lord has given us if we continue to maintain a deep rooted sin pattern in our lives. God just doesn't work that way.

Note that it was only after Joshua found the man who had brought sin into the camp, and he had destroyed the man, his family, and all he owned, that Scripture tells us, "Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger." (Jos 7:26 NIV) After that, God told Joshua to go and fight the people of Ai again and, after the sin had been rooted out and destroyed, Joshua was victorious.

Barrier Four - Human Effort Without God

Now let's look at the fourth barrier that keeps us from achieving God's promises. It is making important decisions without seeking God's counsel. This usually involves making compromises to try to get what God has promised, but doing it our way instead of God's way.

Joshua and the Israelites ran into this barrier when they encountered the Gibeonites in chapter 9 of the book of Joshua. We all know the story. The Gibeonites knew that the Israelites were going to kill them when they got to their land so they devised a scheme to trick Joshua and the people into letting them live. They sent some men dressed in old, worn out clothes, with old moldy food and told the men to act as though they had come a long way and to try to make a treaty with Joshua.

Notice one of the first things the men of Israel said to the Gibeonites when they met, "But perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?" (v 7 NIV) Obviously the Holy Spirit was raising a warning flag with Joshua and his men, wasn't He? He had raised a doubt in Joshua's mind. But Joshua disregarded it. He and his men examined the clothes, animals, etc. of the Gibeonites and Scripture tells us, "The men of Israel sampled their provisions *but did not inquire of the Lord.*" (Jos 9:14 NIV, emphasis added.)

And this was the grave mistake that tainted Israel from then on. Three days after they had entered into the treaty, Joshua found out he had been tricked but he considered himself bound by his word. Oh, he

tried to limit the damage by making the Gibeonites servants of the Israelites, making them wood cutters and water carriers. But what was really happening? Joshua had compromised God's word. He knew he was supposed to kill all the inhabitants of the promised land. Why? Because the inhabitants were idolaters, had strong ties to the demonic realm, were sexually immoral, and all the rest.

So even though the Gibeonites were servants, they brought their idols, their demons, their sexually immoral behavior, and all the rest into the camp. Joshua continued to lead, and the Israelites continued to take more and more of the land. But, spiritually speaking, the idolatry that first entered into Israel through Joshua's spiritual compromise represented the idolatry that was ultimately the downfall of Israel a few hundred years later. Israel never got rid of the idols and immoral behavior introduced into their midst by the Gibeonites.

We see the same principle at work when Abraham decided he had to help God's promise of a son along and he begat Ishmael by the servant woman who was not his wife. Ishmael caused trouble in Abraham's household and his descendants have been causing trouble even to this day. Spiritual compromise, making decisions, and trying to make things come to pass without seeking the counsel of the Lord is so harmful to us.

When we make spiritual compromises with God's word and/or His promises to us, we are bring into our lives a barrier to letting God guide us into the fullness of His promises for our lives, our families, our churches, and our communities. Always, always, always seek God's counsel whenever you make an important decision, whether it concerns your future,

your finances, your family, your ministry, or whatever. God will always be faithful to guide us if we but seek Him.

Conclusion

So how can we avoid and/or overcome the hindrances and barriers we encounter when we prepare to get God's promises for our lives? First by meditating on God's word day and night, and by obeying all His laws. His words and promises to us should ever be in our minds, our thoughts, and our mouths.

We are to use our mouths to speak out loud God's promises. Say those promises aloud! There is great power and authority in the spoken word. We should be proclaiming God's promises to us every day, affirming them, and standing on them, regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Then we are to do what God shows us to do as we take the land. Passive Christians never get very far. God has promised us that we will take every place we set our foot. So why not put our feet into as many places as we can, under the Lord's direction? Remember, the priests didn't whine and complain. They picked up the Ark and walked into the Jordan. It was as they walked that the waters backed up, not before.

And we are to continue to act, hand in hand with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, until we have achieved all the promises. Remember God warns us to not turn to the left or right, thereby becoming distracted and losing focus. We are to be like the fighting men at Jericho, when the walls came down, they went straight in and took the city. I am convinced that our lives can be filled with the amazing things God does if we but believe and obey! Praise His name!

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