

## **“What To Do When You Hit the Wall”**

Joshua 1:1-11

Series: *The Story Chapter 7: The Battle Begins*

The Rev. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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The beginning of Run for God this week reminds me of my parents. I'm so happy that my parents are healthy and have shared many years of love and life together. Some memories make me laugh – like the time they took disco dancing lessons in the 70s. On the other hand, I am immensely proud that they trained for and ran in three marathons. I was in high school then, so they didn't start running until they were *middle aged!* I remember thinking, “I can't believe my parents are going to be in a marathon ... at their advanced age! At this stage of life they should be slowing down and getting ready for the nursing home.” It's funny how I don't think that way anymore. Especially since I am about ten years older now than they were then! Some of the greatest photos on our walls were the triumphant moments when they crossed the finish line in New York. My Dad came in, to use his words, “like a tank.” My Mom raced down the home stretch like she was going for the gold: a spring in her step, a smile on her face and her arms raised in glory! It was truly the thrill of victory!

What those pictures don't tell is the agony of de-feet. I've never known the incredible endurance it takes to keep going for 26.2 miles. Here is a personal testimony by pastor Bryan Wilkerson when he ran the New York City Marathon.

The first half of that race is a party. You're swept along by 28,000 runners, crowds lining the streets. You feel like you could run forever. At mile 13, you cross over into Manhattan and start heading north, away from the finish line. Central Park is behind you, and you're going in the wrong direction. The crowds are thinner now. The party's over.

At about mile 16 or 18, you hit the wall. You're absolutely miserable. Physically and psychologically, you're busted. All you want to do is stop running. I remember passing one of the first aid stations. There were runners lying on cots—pale and gaunt, with IVs dripping into their arms. I thought to myself, “*Those lucky dogs.*” At that point I began to despair. I imagined myself having to go home and tell everybody I didn't finish. Why did I ever sign up for this race? What made me think I could do this?

That's when it hit me. One way or another, I had to get to Central Park. That's where my ride was. I had no car. I had no money. I would have to get there on my own two feet. So I might as well keep running. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Don't think about the next 6 miles; just think about the next step. And if you can keep that up, keep putting one foot in front of the other, the miles pass.

And when you cross that finish line, it feels like glory—even when you're in 10,044th place.<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever hit the wall? Are you hitting it right now? Feel like you can't go on? Are you thinking about giving up? Are you planning to do something foolish? Is there some challenge looming, some overwhelming task that rises up before you? Right now you may need courage to:

- Confront someone you love who is heading down a dangerous path
- Ask forgiveness of someone you hurt
- Restore a relationship which was severed years ago
- Stand up to a bully at school, home or work
- Refuse to do something you know is dishonest
- Let go of some addiction that's got you in its grip
- Share your faith with someone who doesn't go to church or believe in God
- Begin an entirely new venture or begin life over again

Have you hit the wall? Like that marathon runner, are you physically exhausted, are you're psychologically spent? All you want to do is stop. The sidelines of life are littered with former runners. Some of them left God's path because it's easier and more "fun" to follow temptation. Some would rather run their lives their way instead of follow God's will. Some are simply depressed and burned out. Some prefer comfort and routine instead of risk and adventure. And sometimes you look at them longingly and say, "Those lucky dogs." You begin to question yourself, "Why did I ever sign up to follow Jesus? What made me think I could do this? What will people say when they see I gave up?" The next step is in front of you. The question is: do you have the courage to take it?

Joshua asks himself the same thing. Moses is dead. For more than four decades the great liberator, the lawgiver, the servant and friend of God led the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the desert. Everyone alive knew only one leader: Moses. But now, at the critical moment, when they are about to cross the Jordan and settle the Promised Land, Moses passes away. Who will help the tribes claim their inheritance, who will lead them against all the nations? The mantle falls on Joshua, Moses' right hand man.

Talk about pressure. Talk about high expectations. Talk about impossible odds. There are numerous tribes and nations in Canaan. There are heavily fortified cities. There are trained armies with powerful weapons. There are even giants in them thar' hills. And Joshua's army? The Israelites are disorganized, ill-trained and quarrelsome. Even the great Moses took forty years to get them from Egypt to Canaan. They won a few battles but they are not prepared to conquer a whole country. The end of this forty year marathon is in sight but the toughest part lies ahead. Forty years ago Joshua and his friend Caleb were the only ones with the courage and faith in God to face overwhelming odds and invade the land. The Israelites felt like an army of grasshoppers compared to the Canaanite giants. Back then, Joshua told the people their army of grasshoppers would

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Wilkerson, from the sermon "Endurance."

swarm like a plague of locust all over the land. Now, a generation later, Joshua gets his chance. Yet I bet, without Moses by his side, he probably feels worn, weary, even terrified. He may want to quit the race altogether. First he must get the whole army across the Jordan River and then mount his first battle against the city of Jericho – talk about hitting the wall! Just then, the Lord speaks to Joshua:

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. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses (Joshua 1:2-3).

‘Just keep putting one foot in front of the other,’ Joshua’s Almighty Coach whispers. ‘Don’t think about the whole country. Just think about the next step. If you keep that up, if you keep in step with me, then you’ll cross the finish line and it will feel like glory.’

Last week we looked at the question of why God seems so grouchy and angry in the Old Testament. Watch that sermon online if you were not able to be here. My simple response is that the picture of God in the Old Testament is not complete until we meet God in the New Testament in the person of Jesus. The character of God seems fuzzy until we look back through the lens of Jesus. Then God’s true character of Justice, Mercy and Love come into sharp focus.

All that relates to a key question in this week’s chapter of the STORY: Does God approve of war? Does the Bible teach us that Holy War is God’s will? This topic can be debated for weeks. Let me share with you a few principles.

1. War and Conflict have been part of humanity since we left the Garden of Eden. From Cain’s murder of Abel down to the massacre of Christian martyrs by Isis, war is our creation not God’s
2. Every side in every conflict believes God or the gods are on their side. Holy War is our creation not God’s In his second oath of office near the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said about the Union and Confederacy:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

Lincoln knew that God was working through Civil War to end slavery. He did not believe God was on anyone’s side. In fact, he felt the carnage of that terrible war was the price both sides paid for allowing slavery to endure so long.

3. God’s plan, the Upper Story, is to bring blessing to all nations through one nation – Israel. This is why God called Abraham in Genesis 12. This is why God freed Israel from slavery through Moses. This is why God gives the Promised Land to His people.

4. For a limited time, God uses Israel's Holy War to settle His Holy people in the Promised Land. But God is more concerned about Holy Ways. He wants to have a holy relationship with all people of all nations.
5. There will always be opposition to God's Holy Ways. People prefer the gods they create to the One True God. We want our kingdom to come, not God's. So there will inevitably be conflict, for Joshua and for us, when we try to live God's Holy Ways.
6. Just because you are God's Holy people does not mean you are holier-than-thou. Moses made this very clear to the Israelites before he died.

After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deuteronomy 9:4-5)

7. The real battle is not in the physical world but the spiritual world. Paul says, For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

Jesus fought and won the ultimate holy war against evil, sin, death and the devil on the Cross. Now people from all nations can have a holy relationship with God. There is no longer any holy war. Now we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44) and, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:8)

So the lessons Joshua learned as he hit the wall in a military sense can be used by us as we hit our walls in a spiritual sense. The Lord gave Joshua three steps to remember – each begins with the same refrain: "Be strong and courageous." The first step is **Our Courage Depends on God's Promises**. The Lord said,

Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them (Joshua 1:6).

You've probably all seen a Peanuts comic strip where Lucy holds the football for Charlie Brown to kick. Yet at the last minute she pulls it away and he goes flying and lands on his back. When he refuses to fall for it again, Lucy offers him a signed contract guaranteeing she won't pull away the football. With the signed contract in hand, Charlie Brown courageously races toward the football, confident this time he will send it sailing. But at the last minute Lucy pulls back the football and he goes sailing and lands on his back. As the signed contract floats to earth, Lucy catches it and says, "Funny thing about this signed contract – it's not notarized."

It's been 650 years since God promised to give Canaan to Abraham, then Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's sons. He renewed the promise to Moses and the slaves from Egypt. He even gave them a signed contract on Mount Sinai. But it took another 40 years. They started to wonder if God will keep His promise or pull it away at the last minute. But friends, God always keeps His promise. It may take longer than we expect. We may not live to see it. But God will keep His promise. If God promises to comfort you, He will comfort you. If God promises to provide for your needs, He will provide for your needs. If God promises to forgive your sins, He will forgive your sins. If God promises to guide you through this life, He will guide you through this life. If God promises to save you, He will save you. You have a signed contract to prove it: a covenant signed with His blood. Be strong and courageous – God keeps His promises.

Second step: **Our Courage Depends on God's Word.** The Lord continued:  
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 (Joshua 1:7).

The Bible is the road map for following the Lord. When we deviate from it to the right or left, it doesn't take long before we get off the path and wander into dangerous territory. But if you stay on the narrow way the Bible lays before you, He will fill you with wisdom and courage.

President Gerald Ford had a close friend named Billy Zeoli whom Ford called his "alter ego, a second self." Zeoli led a ministry to professional athletes. In the fall of 1973 when Ford became vice president, Zeoli sent him a weekly devotional memo which arrived on Ford's desk every Monday morning. It always bore the same title: "God's Got a Better Idea." It started with Scripture and concluded with a prayer. Zeoli sent 146 devotionals in all, every week through Ford's presidency. Ford and Zeoli also met about once a month for Bible study and prayer in the Oval Office. In his memoirs, President Ford wrote that he and Zeoli

both put our trust in Christ, our Savior, and have relied on him for direction and guidance throughout our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Don't miss the guidance which President Ford couldn't live without. How do you get the most out of the Bible? This is what the Lord told Joshua to do:

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 (Joshua 1:8).

God tells you to talk about it with your mouth. A good place to do that is in a Growth Group. He directs you to meditate on it day and night. Carve out some quiet time each day to read the STORY, to store God's Word in your heart and mind. Then, be careful *to*

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, "The Other Born-Again President," Time (1-15-07), p. 40

*do* what is written in it. In other words, apply what you learn. Read the Bible daily and you'll discover "God's Got a Better Idea."

Third step: **Our Courage Depends on God's Presence Not Our Feelings.** The Lord concluded:

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 two most powerful weapons against courage are feelings of fear and self-doubt. Most of us are already defeated by these inner enemies before we show up to face the challenge. How do we overcome fear and self-doubt? Remember that the One who is with us is more powerful than anything we face. The Lord begins by saying to Joshua,

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 (Joshua 1:5).

Then He finishes with: "For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). God is in front and behind Joshua and the Israelites. So what did Joshua do? He gathered his officers and ordered them to:

Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your supplies ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own' (Joshua 1:10-11).

It was the first step toward the finish line in the Promised Land. No matter what doubts destroy your confidence, no matter what obstacles overwhelm you, no matter what fears freeze you in your tracks, no matter how high are the walls you hit, the Lord says "Be Strong and Courageous! I give you My Word, My Presence and My Promise. Don't worry about the whole journey. Just take the next step.

Today I challenge you to take a step for the Lord. In your bulletin is a card with a list of the many missions we support. God wants us to inject hope into despair, to bring light into darkness, to spread salt where people are slipping, to share Good News when everything seems bad. Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of darkness: the darkness of poverty, injustice, homeless, hopelessness and addiction and unbelief. Our weapons are not guns and bombs, but prayer, Scripture, salvation and service. Sitting on the sidelines is not an option. Running away is not an option. Failure is not an option. God is calling us to go forward by faith in His mighty power. Today, I ask you to put down your name, email, sign up for one of these missions and place it on this communion table as your commitment to God. And if nothing captures your heart, if nothing calls to you, write down a new idea and we'll help you get started. Today is the day to make the walls of evil come tumbling down. Today is our day to take a step.

Raymond Germany took the wrong step. When he was 15, Raymond's mother Debra begged him to leave the "thug life." He didn't listen. The lure of making \$1000 a day dealing drugs was too strong. In July 2001, his career ended suddenly. Shot in the

back of the head, he died alone on an empty staircase in a Pittsburgh housing project. Raymond was 23.

His mother Debra cried. At first all she could do was cry. Then, with God's help, she became strong and courageous. In March 2002, Debra Germany took a step. She co-founded Divine Intervention Ministries along with Valerie Dixon, who also lost her son to gun violence. "If I can save one person by talking about what happened to my son, it's worth it," says Debra. At first she used billboards to focus on unsolved murders and search for community solutions to crime. These two mothers comforted grieving family members who lost a loved one to violence. Then the Lord told them to take the next step. They formed a ministry called IMPACT (Interceding Making Positive Actions Come Together) in the fall of 2006. Now they go into prisons to restore the lives of incarcerated young men and give them opportunities to rebuild their lives after release. Debra Germany believes if more is done to educate and rehabilitate young men, the nation would not have to keep building bigger prisons. She is convinced God is preparing to raise up a nation of men on fire for Him.

These men will do things that are unheard of in the realm of rehabilitation after incarceration. Who better to tell us how to stop violence than the young men committing the violence themselves? As we help restore them, they in turn will reach back and help restore each other.

So she speaks out—in prisons, boot camps, schools, and churches all across the state of Pennsylvania. "I'm an ambassador for Christ," she says with a smile. "Whenever God gives me a platform, it is my pulpit."<sup>3</sup> With God on her side, Debra Germany is a strong and courageous ambassador for Christ. How about you?

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<sup>3</sup> Ervin Dyer's "Divine Intervention," *Today's Christian* (May/June 2007), pp. 34-37