

Who was Joshua in the Bible?

Joshua is best known as Moses' second in command who takes over and leads the Israelites into the Promised Land after Moses' death. Joshua is considered one of the Bible's greatest military leaders for leading the seven-year conquest of the Promised Land, and is often held up as a model for leadership and a source of practical application on how to be an effective leader. Let's look at his life from a biblical perspective.

As a military leader, Joshua would be considered one of the greatest generals in human history, but it would be a mistake to credit Israel's victory solely to Joshua's skill as a military general. The first time we see Joshua is in Exodus 17 in the battle against the Amalekites. Exodus 17:13 tells us that Joshua "overwhelmed Amalek and his people," and so we're tempted to conclude that Joshua's military expertise saved the day. But in this passage we see something odd occurring. In verse 11 we read, "Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed." Eventually, Moses' arms grew so weary that a stone had to be brought for him to sit on and Aaron and Hur held his hands up. Hence, we see in this vignette that Joshua prevailed because God gave him the battle.

The same can be said of the military victories in the Promised Land. The Lord had promised sure victory and delivered it in convincing fashion. The only exception is in the battle of Ai (Joshua 7). There are several things to note about this incident. Israel broke faith with God regarding the "devoted things" (Joshua 7:1). God had commanded the Israelites to devote everything to destruction (Joshua 6:17), and Achan had kept some of the loot from the battle of Jericho for himself. Because of this, God judged them by not giving them the victory at Ai. Another thing to note is that there is no explicit command by God to go against Ai. The purpose of putting these two battle

stories side by side is to show that when God sets the program and agenda, victory follows, but when man sets the program and agenda, failure ensues. Jericho was the Lord's battle; Ai was not. God redeemed the situation and eventually gave them the victory, but not until after the object lesson was given.

Further evidence of Joshua's leadership qualities can be seen in his rock-solid faith in God. When the Israelites were on the edge of the Promised Land in Numbers 13, God commanded Moses to send out twelve people to spy out the land, one from each of the tribes of Israel. Upon their return, ten reported that the land, while bounteous as the Lord had promised, was occupied by strong and fierce warriors dwelling in large, fortified cities. Furthermore, the Nephilim (giants from the Israelites' perspective) were in the land. Joshua and Caleb were the only two who urged the people to take the land (Numbers 14:6-10). Here we see one thing that sets Joshua (and Caleb) apart from the rest of the Israelites—they believed in the promises of God. They were not intimidated by the size of the warriors or the strength of the cities. Rather, they knew their God and remembered how He had dealt with Egypt, the most powerful nation on the earth at that time. If God could take care of the mighty Egyptian army, He could certainly take care of the various Canaanite tribes. God rewarded Joshua's and Caleb's faith by exempting them from the entire generation of Israelites that would perish in the wilderness.

We see Joshua's faithfulness in the act of obediently consecrating the people before the invasion of the Promised Land and again after the defeat at Ai. But no more clearly is Joshua's faithfulness on display than at the end of the book that bears his name when he gathers the people together one last time and recounts the deeds of God on their behalf. After that speech, Joshua urges the people to forsake their idols and remain faithful to

the covenant that God made with them at Sinai, saying, “And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

So what can we learn from Joshua’s life? Can we draw principles for leadership from his life? Sure. That God gave him the victory in taking the Promised Land does not take away from his military leadership. Furthermore, he was a more-than-capable leader for the Israelites, but his skill in leadership is not the primary lesson we should draw from Joshua’s life. A better lesson would be Joshua’s faithfulness, his stand against the ten spies who brought the disparaging report about the obstacles in taking over the Promised Land, and his zeal in ensuring the covenant faithfulness of the people. But even his faith wasn’t perfect. There is the fact that Joshua sent spies into Jericho even though God had ensured victory, and then there is the overconfidence he exhibited in the battle of Ai.

The primary lesson to draw from Joshua’s life is that God is faithful to His promises. God promised Abraham that his descendants would dwell in the land, and, under Joshua, God brought the people into the land that He had promised to give to them. This act completed the mission of redemption that God started with Moses in bringing Israel out of Egypt. It is also a type that points to the ultimate redemption that Jesus brings to the community of faith. Like Moses, Jesus delivered us from bondage and slavery to sin, and, like Joshua, Jesus will bring us into the eternal Promised Land and everlasting Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:8-10).