

**THE VISION SUMMIT –
STAGE 3. PREPARING FOR THE CLIMB**

Deuteronomy 3: 27-28; 34:9-12

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PREFACE

Today marks the third week of the six week Vision Summit Series. We are using the story of Moses, when he stopped to climb Mount Nebo while leading the people of God on the journey to the Promised Land, as a background for the series and modern mountain climbing as a metaphor for the mission of the church. This Vision Summit series is an opportunity to find encouragement in our life together, see where God is leading us, and consider how we can pass the torch of faith to the next generation.

In our first Scripture reading we turn to near the beginning of Deuteronomy where God instructs Moses to climb Mount Nebo (also known as Pisgah Peak). Furthermore, God reminds Moses that he will not make it into the Promised Land and that the leadership for the journey will pass to Joshua.

SCRIPTURE

But go up to Pisgah Peak, and look over the land in every direction. Take a good look, but you may not cross the Jordan River. ²⁸Instead, commission Joshua and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead the people across the Jordan. He will give them all the land you now see before you as their possession” (Deuteronomy 3:27-28 NLT).

PREFACE (con’t)

Our second Scripture reading takes us back to the end of the passage with which we began this series and then carries it a bit further.

SCRIPTURE

Now Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him, doing just as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰There has never been another prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹The LORD sent him to perform all the miraculous signs and wonders in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, and all his servants, and his entire land. ¹²With mighty power, Moses performed terrifying acts in the sight of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34:9-12 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

Modern mountain climbing can provide a helpful analogy to describe the life and mission of the church. Climbing is a group effort. The climbers are part of a larger team – most of whom do not make the actual climb but nonetheless are essential for and benefit from a successful climb. You may be the spiritual equivalent of a climber or a sponsor or an outfitter or support staff but what is needed is that we work together as a team in order to have a successful expedition as the people of God.

Mountain climbing is carried out in stages. The first stage is the choosing of the peak. We need to know where we are going. We examined that stage the first week. The second stage involves surveying the mountain. We need to know the challenges we face. We examined that stage last week.

The third stage is preparing for the climb. What are the resources and capabilities that are needed for the climb? In terms of ascending a mountain this would include climbing gear, clothing and footwear, food and water, first aid and emergency supplies, as well as physical conditioning and training.

In terms of preparing for the spiritual expedition we call the mission of the church, we also need to be concerned about resources and capabilities. Now a mountain climber can get supplies from an outfitter. But for the journey of faith we need to look to a different source. So where do we look?

1. SPIRIT OF GOD

The answer I think is found in what Moses did for Joshua to prepare for the journey of faith to the Promised Land:

Now Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him (Deut 34:9a).

Moses laid his hands on Joshua. In the ancient near east the laying on of hands represented the transfer of something from one person to another person or even to an animal. On the Day of Atonement the high priest was to lay his hands on the head of a goat while confessing the sins of the people. The sins were symbolically transferred to the goat and the goat was sent away – a dramatic, visual reminder of God’s forgiveness.¹ Moses laid his hands on Joshua and this represented the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua. The Book of Numbers gives us more details:

¹ The goat was referred to as the scapegoat. The term has found its way into modern English and refers to someone who is blamed for the mistakes of others.

The LORD replied, “Take Joshua son of Nun, who has the Spirit in him, and lay your hands on him. ¹⁹Present him to Eleazar the priest before the whole community, and publicly commission him to lead the people. Transfer some of your authority to him so the whole community of Israel will obey him (Num 27:18-20 NLT).

The laying on of hands symbolically represented the transfer of authority. But we need to be clear that, ultimately, this authority is from God. Even before the laying on of hands, God tells Moses that the Spirit of God is in Joshua. Joshua did not receive the Spirit because of the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands was a way to recognize that God had already called Joshua, was already at work in Joshua’s life. Even today when we ordain ruling elders, teaching elders, or deacons, we lay hands on them not as a way to confer the Spirit of God but to recognize that God has already called these people into service and they will need to rely upon that same Spirit of God to carry out this service.

This then is the most important preparation we can make in our spiritual expedition as the people of God. We need to make sure we have the Spirit of God. Without the Spirit we are powerless.

Trying to do something without the necessary power is a lesson in frustration. A three-year-old boy received a Superman cape as a birthday present. He excitedly put on his new costume and ran outside as fast as he could. After a few minutes of running and jumping in the backyard, the boy returned to the house and angrily tore the costume off and threw it on the floor. With disgust the boy complained, "It doesn't matter how hard I try; I can't get this stupid thing to work!"

Trying to live the Christian life without the necessary spiritual power will also lead to frustration. If we try to carry out the mission of the church in our own strength then sooner or later we are going to wonder, “Why can’t we get this stupid thing to work?”

We need the power of the Holy Spirit. But unlike the power represented by the Superman cape, the power of the Holy Spirit really exists. However, the Holy Spirit does not force his way into our lives. Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ has the Holy Spirit. But in order to experience the power of the Spirit we need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. We cooperate with the Holy Spirit largely through prayer and obedience to Scripture. The more we appreciate the Holy Spirit the greater our ability to understand and apply God's Word to our lives, the greater our assurance of faith, the greater our intimacy with the Lord, and the greater our ability to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ to a lost and hurting world. Are you cooperating in such a way as to be experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in your life?

2. GIFT OF WISDOM

Not only do we need the Spirit of God but we also need the gift of wisdom. Notice the text says:

Now Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom (Deut 34:9a).

The spirit of wisdom is not a rival deity to the Spirit of God. Rather this is a figure of speech meaning “wisdom that is a gift from God.” The word wisdom, as it is used in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible also known as the Books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), refers to practical skills and planning. An example would be the fabricating of special garments for worship.

Instruct all the skilled craftsmen whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom. Have them make garments for Aaron that will distinguish him as a priest set apart for my service (Ex 28:3 NLT).

The spiritual expedition to be led by Joshua required the spirit of wisdom. This remains true today. In order to prepare for what God has in store for us as a congregation we need the spirit of wisdom, we need practical skills and planning.

A helpful resource for this is Thom Rainer’s book, *Scrappy Church*. Among other things, he talks about the turnaround cycle. It is a pattern that he has noticed in his consulting work with churches that have turned things around. Such churches have an outward focus, a welcome readiness, and encourage active participation.

An outward focus is the call of Jesus. The command he gave to us, that he said had the highest authority behind it, was not “Sit still” or “Look only to your own interests” or “Stay put.” No, he said, “Go!” “Go and make new disciples.” “Go and be my witnesses.” “Go out into the lanes and behind the hedges and urge people to come.”² “Go!” We need to go out because Jesus wants us to go out and people need us to go out. We need an outward focus.

We also need to be a welcoming church. Interestingly enough, most American church members think their own church is friendly. Yet survey after survey shows that most American churches are not friendly. The contradiction can be explained by the fact that most church members go to a particular church because that is where their friends go to church. So naturally the church is friendly – for them! But if you are new to a church it

² Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8; Lk 14:23.

can often be a different story.

Of course, it used to be a lot worse. The story is told of a young woman who visited a Presbyterian church one Sunday morning. Little did she know that the congregation was known for its staunch Calvinism and its minister was particularly strident. Before the service started the minister went over to the young woman and the two made brief introductions. Then the minister asked, "Are you a Presbyterian?" "Oh, no," said the woman, "I'm Methodist." The minister was not pleased with this answer. "Methodist? Methodist? Why in heaven's name are you a Methodist?" "Well," she replied, "My parents are Methodist. My grandparents were Methodist. And my great-grandparents were Methodist." "That's a ridiculous reason," bellowed the minister, "If your parents had been idiots and your grandparents had been idiots and your great-grandparents had been idiots, what would that make you?" "Well," she said, "I supposed I'd be Presbyterian."

We need to be a genuinely welcoming church. We need a welcome readiness. The Apostle Paul speaks to this when he says he wants to be the servant of all people. And the reason he gives for this is:

So that I might win more of them" (1 Cor 9:19 NRSV).

Paul wants to win people to Christ. The Greek word for win is interesting. When it applies to finances it means to obtain by investment. When it applies to people it means to develop a relationship, that is, make a friend. Paul uses it 5 times in 4 verses. (Even if he had only used it twice that would still be a win-win situation! But here in 1 Corinthians 9 it is a win-win-win-win-win situation!)

A winsome love is one that builds relationships and helps people find a deep personal connection with Christ. It does not manipulate people nor does it distort the message but it seeks an authentic and heartfelt connection.

The motivation for this is Jesus himself. Through Jesus we become friends of God and he gives us the wonderful privilege of helping others become his friends, also (2 Cor 5:18). This requires a winsome love, a welcome readiness.

We need an outward focus. We need a welcoming readiness. And we need to encourage active participation.

Unfortunately, for all intents and purposes, most people who come to churches, including most people who join churches, have only experienced what happens for an hour on Sunday morning. Even then most are mistaken in their observation of what transpires.

People think of the congregation as the audience, the preacher and others on the “stage” as the actors, and God is out of sight and off stage giving prompts and directions. But this is not correct. Biblically and theologically speaking this is not correct. God is the audience – an audience of one. What we do here is for God. Those of us on the chancel give prompts and directions. You are the actors, the performers. God is here to see you.

We need to teach people that it is a delight to participate together in the spiritual adventure we call church. It is a great joy to be involved in what God is doing in our community and in our world. Christianity is not a spectator sport. If you are watching something happen, then you are not really part of it. You are not engaged in it. We need to engage our behavior and participate together in fulfilling God’s purposes for the church.

The Gospel ministry is not meant to be a one-person job. The followers of Jesus are to participate together in this work. And those who participate in the work share in its many blessings.

CONCLUSION

When mountain climbers prepare for a climb they consider the resources and capabilities they need. In a similar manner, in order for us to undertake the spiritual expedition we call the mission of the church, we need to consider the resources and capabilities we need. Over the months ahead we will be exploring in more detail what exactly this means for our congregation.

Meanwhile, our spiritual expedition will not be making any headway if we do not have the Spirit of God. And if we have the Spirit of God then we need to cooperate with the Spirit and seek the Spirit’s wisdom.

Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first to climb Mount Everest. Hillary used to say he was not particularly good climber. He claimed his success was due to a strong back and lots of enthusiasm.

These are qualities not unlike what we need in the church – Enthusiasm³ and a willingness to put our backs into it, the Spirit of God and practical exertion.

It takes effort to prepare for the future but we have good reason to prepare. After all, God is not done with us yet!

³ Enthusiasm literally means “inspired by God.”