

“Every Place That You Go”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
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***“Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon
I have given you...” (Joshua 1:3)***

One of the amazing things about the Word is the way it encapsulates our spiritual tasks. As so many of us know, there is incredible power in the literal stories of the Word to captivate our senses and show us, as if in a pageant, the messages for our lives.

This is so true of the story we focus on today. The Lord said to Joshua, “Arise, go across Jordan, you and all of this people, to the land which I am giving to them...” (Joshua 1:2). In our mind’s eye, we can “see” Joshua and the Israelites walking across the Jordan into the Land of Canaan. We can picture the battles they would wage against the powerful peoples of the land, with their fortified cities and large armies. We can easily imagine the tremendous effort it would take engage in these battles and take possession of the land. Yet we can forecast the result of this conquest—the vision of safe homes in a beautiful land, for people who had previously wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

What is the parallel message for our lives—the spiritual sense contained within? This too is not beyond us. The call for us is to the battle for our souls—the big task of our salvation. We know that the Lord calls to us, in the midst of all the to-dos and busyness of life, to move forward in the life that leads to heaven. We know that it means prioritizing spiritual life over natural life—that we consider in the moment the principles we have been taught and draw on them in the decisions that come up; that we carve out time for prayer and reflection—prayers of gratitude and reflections on the Lord’s will; that we treat others the way we would want to be treated, despite what they have done to us; that take the time to examine ourselves, hold ourselves accountable for any sin that we see, repent with the Lord’s help, and begin a new way of living (*True Christian Religion* 530). We know too the end goal, of life in heaven eventually, but also of contentedness and joy with those we love in this world—heaven on earth.

The promises of an amazing God. The message for today, though, is that we do not wage this battle alone. There is an incredible God who is promising to be with us every step of the way. In terms of the Lord’s specific promises to Joshua, there are three. The first one is: “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread, I have given to you” (Joshua 1:3). The second one is: “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life” (Joshua 1:5). The third one is: “I will not leave you nor forsake you” (*Ibid.*).

What opens for us by means of these three statements is the realization of how powerfully and constantly the Lord is working on our behalf. These are the promises of an amazing God. So many teachings in the Heavenly Doctrines can illustrate. One passage says, “The Lord’s Divine love cannot but will that a person come into heaven and there enjoy eternal blessedness, and His Divine wisdom also cannot but provide for it” (*Divine Providence* 324). We could absorb the fact that Divine love acting by means of Divine wisdom is the source of all Divine power, or what we call “omnipotence” (see *Conjugal Love* 21). We learn further that the

Lord's love is infinite, His wisdom is infinite, and therefore His power is infinite (see *True Christian Religion* 36). Then there is a passage that compares the Lord's strength to the sometimes-ominous power of hell. It likens hell to a gigantic monster, against which we have no chance. Analogies used are a fish against the ocean, a gnat against a whale, a piece of dust against a falling mountain, a locust against an elephant, a fly against a camel (*True Christian Religion* 68). But the point of the passage is to say that the Lord is much stronger than that gigantic monster. The implication is that He is like the ocean, the whale, the falling mountain, the elephant or the camel. Then there is a passage which speaks directly to the aid the Lord can bring us when we ask for it: "The smallest amount of Divine power is enough, every time it is called on, to tame instantly the entire devil's crew, even if it consisted of millions" (*Arcana Caelestia* 8626).

With these teachings in mind we can return to the Lord's specific promises: "Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon, I have given you." The colloquial way of saying the same thing is that the Lord is going to be with us every step of the way. Whatever we face, He is right there beside us. Not only that, but He is, to use a phrase from the Psalms, "enlarging our path under us," or constantly creating the context for our success (Psalm 18:36).

"No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life." No challenge is too big for the Lord, no problem is unsolvable, no hurt is un-healable, no destructive habit is unbreakable.

"I will not leave you nor forsake you." No matter what we do the Lord will never give up on us. No personal failing is a deal-breaker. We read, "When the Lord is with someone He leads that person and makes provision so that all that happens, whether sad or joyful, may bring him or her what is good. This is Divine Providence" (*Arcana Caelestia* 6303).

The implied invitation here is to place our trust in the Lord. There is no question, when considering the path or our salvation, or the many hardships of life that come our way, that the Lord can help. Prayer, as most of us know, can especially help us with the recognition of our need for the Lord's help. Reflection is another. Taking time for contemplation can lead to the acknowledgment that everything good in our lives is from the Lord, and open up the willingness within us to submit ourselves to His will. Joshua appears to have had one of these prayerful times of reflection, and was strengthened greatly by the promises of a great God.

Orderly steps. Beyond trust, important as it is, there are the steps that we are to take. If there's one thing the New Church teaches, it is that we have our part to play in the process of our salvation. Loving, wise, and powerful though the Lord is, the experience of spiritual progress cannot come to us without our engagement.

We heard a passage earlier about order. It says, "In regard to the Divine Omnipotence it does not involve any power of acting contrary to order, but it involves all power of acting according to order" (*Apocalypse Explained* 689). That passage went on to say that order demands that we do our part by acting in freedom in accordance with our reason. Our part, according to this teaching, is to follow the laws of order, or the "precepts of doctrine and of life from the Word" (*Ibid.*).

So we read in the Scriptures, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He

delights in his way” (Psalm 37:23). We know the implication—to walk in the way of the Lord’s commandments, or to do the things that are required of us in the Word. One pathway relates to our employment: “acting justly and faithfully in our position and our work” (*True Christian Religion* 422). This is spelled out for us as “paying workers, paying interest on loans, honoring agreements, taking care of deposited valuables, and other things like that” (*True Christian Religion* 432).

Another area of life where order is required is in marriage and relationships with the opposite sex. We are reminded that “the human inclination towards marriage goes hand in hand with religion at every step. Every little step and every stride away from religion or towards religion is also a step or stride away from or towards the conjugal inclination that is peculiar and proper to a Christian person” (*Conjugal Love* 80). It is not hard to see what is required of us here either. No wandering eye. Staying faithful. Actually treating the person to whom we are married with the love that we profess to have. Being honest, respectful, and truthful. Fighting against jealousy and superiority. Similar things can be required of those who are not yet married but wish to lead the orderly life that is the basis for a healthy marriage one day.

Steps of spiritual conquest. An orderly life is indeed something the Lord calls us to strive for. We know, though, that in the process there are going to be battles to face. There is a calling to spiritual conquest. In this regard, we turn to a powerful teaching that talks about a helpful mindset we are to have. It talks about the natural part of ourselves, and the spiritual part. In the Lord’s order, the spiritual part of us is to “have dominion,” meaning that spiritual principles guide what we actually say and do. But left to our natural selves, that means we have to reject “strong evil desires” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5650). Frankly, there is a part of us that loves putting ourselves first and indulging in ways that are purely worldly and serve no use. We find some delight in arguing. We are all too familiar with the subtle sentiment that we deserve some indulgences that are unhealthy for us. We can so easily procrastinate in terms of really tackling the giants in our lives—of impatience, condescension, and thoughtless disregard for the feelings of others.

The passage just referenced, though, continues: “When some light flows from the Lord through heaven” we see things differently (*Ibid.*). We consider what is good and useful. We notice the pain we may be causing others. We allow the thought in that angels of heaven live according to the Lord’s laws and experience tremendous joy as a result. The result is that we are willing “to go to war” with the purely natural part of ourselves, wishing to make this part subject to the spiritual part. There is no question that the story that is our focus today draws our attention to these battles. Like the Israelites, we do not need to face them all at once. City by city, area by area, though, we are to make progress.

A little card of “Take Home Ideas” accompanies this talk. On it is a list of 14 “opposites”—one side to symbolize the enemies of the land, and the other to stand for the life the Lord would have us live. Anger vs. Peace. Hatred vs. Love. Selfishness vs. Helpfulness. Greed vs. Generosity. Disrespect vs. Respect. Laziness vs. Usefulness. Anxiety vs. Trust. The invitation is to pick one such pairing, do some reflection on it, and see what progress the Lord can lead us to make in that area. This is in line with a passage which urges us: “Therefore, kind reader, take a look inside yourself, diligently search out one evil or another within yourself, and turn away

from it for religious reasons” (*True Christian Religion* 566).

Steps of spiritual devotion. A final set of steps, at least for today, involves a consistent checking in with the Word of the Lord. Joshua was commanded to “meditate” on the Book of the law “day and night” (Joshua 1:8). He was to “observe to do all that is written in it” (Ibid.). All of us know the call to learn from the Lord’s Word. What is described here, though, is an ongoing interaction with the Word as we engage in the challenges and choices of daily life. The option is before us to start, or renew, or continue a reading program—through the Bible or a book of the Heavenly Doctrines. Implied is the regular diet of truth that comes from reading the Word on a consistent basis and coming to Church to hear the Word taught. Implied also is the bringing of specific challenges in our lives to the Lord in His Word, asking for guidance on what we are facing. Only then can we observe to do all that is written in it, and know what it means not to turn to the right hand or to the left.

A return to the promise. Truly the Lord places a lot before us in terms of our spiritual lives. We are to cooperate with Him, actively and daily, in the conquest that is our salvation. Seen in its entirety it can indeed feel daunting, even undoable. Yet when we break it down into individual steps, and remember that the Lord is with us, we can be more confident. Each day there are single steps that we are called to take: the step of saying something kind, the step of treating the person in front of us the way we’d like to be treated, the step of reading something from the Lord’s Word, the step of saying a prayer to the Lord, the step of not doing something wrong that we want to do just this one time.

The trust that we are called to is that the Lord will be able to use these small steps to help us receive a little more of the life of heaven as our own. The truth is, to the extent that we “arise and go across Jordan” and engage in the battle for our own salvation..., to the extent that we remind ourselves constantly of the all-loving, all-wise, and all-powerful God who is helping us every step of the way..., and to the extent that we take steps each and every day along the path of truth, we will experience spiritual prosperity and “good success.” We will be blessed by the Lord. No bad event, no malicious sphere from hell, no practical challenge will be able to defeat us. We will go forward with the sure knowledge that the Lord is with us. And we will experience the inner peace that comes from walking on the path to heaven together with our Lord. “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you.... No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:3,5). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Joshua 1:1-9; Matthew 28:18-20; *Apocalypse Explained* 689.

Joshua 1

¹After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying: ²"Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. ³Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. ⁴From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. ⁵No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. ⁶Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. ⁸This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Matthew 28

¹⁸Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Apocalypse Explained 689

In regard to the Divine Omnipotence it does not involve any power of acting contrary to order, but it involves all power of acting according to order, for all order is from the Lord. It therefore follows that no one has any power of acting according to order, except from Him who is the source of order. From this it is evident that it is of the Divine Omnipotence to lead human beings according to order, and this every moment from the beginning of their life even to eternity and according to the laws of order, which are innumerable and inexpressible by number. Yet this can take place so far as human beings allow themselves to be led, that is, so far as they do not desire to be led of themselves, for in the measure that they desire this they are brought into opposition to order. Because it is of the Divine Omnipotence to lead those who desire to be led, according to order, and thus to lead no one contrary to order, therefore, it is not of the Divine Omnipotence to lead any one to heaven who desires to lead himself or herself. This is because it is a law of order, that what people do, they should do from reason and freedom, since what is received by reason and done from freedom remains with them, and is appropriated to them as their own, but not that which is not received by the reason and not done from freedom. It is therefore evident that it is not of the Divine Omnipotence to save those who do not desire to be led according to order, for to be led according to order is to be led according to the laws of order, and the laws of order are the precepts of doctrine and of life from the Word. Therefore to lead those who desire to be led, every moment and continually to eternity according to these, is of the Divine Omnipotence.