

# The Soul of a Nation

*Frank Ramirez*

*Salt & Light: A Guide for Biblical Studies* is a quarterly Bible study guide published by Brethren Press and MennoMedia. The sessions are based on the Uniform Series International Sunday School Lessons, produced by the National Council of Churches. *Salt & Light* discusses the biblical texts through a theological lens that coheres with the Anabaptist orientation of the Mennonite and Church of the Brethren communions, as well as the Radical Pietist history of the Church of the Brethren.

In this quarter we follow God's people a generation and more after they were liberated from slavery in Egypt. They settle into the land of Canaan, struggle with an unwieldy confederation of tribes headed by judges, and follow the leadership of the judge and prophet Samuel to and through the formation of the monarchy.

As we contemplate the Israelites' failings, we are invited to reflect on our own failings and to be thankful for God's steadfast love, despite our shortcomings. As we evaluate the Israelites' leaders, we are reminded to choose our own leaders with care. For those of us hailing from the Anabaptist tradition, these violent texts can be some of the most unpleasant and challenging to study. Rather than simply ignore or reject them, we can view these texts as an opportunity to consider how we can live faithfully in the midst of a world that does not share our commitments to life lived in covenant relationship with God and with one another.

---

Unless otherwise noted, scriptures come from the NRSVue.

**Frank Ramirez** is a prolific writer and reader, retired Church of the Brethren pastor, and lifelong student of the Bible. Frank has written numerous times for *A Guide for Biblical Studies*, and has authored several titles in the Covenant Bible Studies series. He is a member of the Rock Run Church of the Brethren, in Goshen, Indiana.

Session 1. September 6, 2026

# The Covenant Continues

*Joshua 1:1–11*

## Purpose of Session

To help us claim our place, strong and courageously, as part of a long chain of believers who carry the torch of faith.

## Home Daily Bible Readings

<b>MON</b>	More Than Victorious	Romans 8:31–39
<b>TUE</b>	See What God Has Promised	Genesis 13:14–18
<b>WED</b>	The Promised Land Revealed	Deuteronomy 34:1–12
<b>THU</b>	God’s Promised Rest	Hebrews 4:1–10
<b>FRI</b>	God’s New Covenant	Hebrews 10:14–18
<b>SAT</b>	Whom Shall I Fear?	Psalm 27
<b>SUN</b>	Be Strong and Courageous	Joshua 1:1–11



## SPIRITUAL PREPARATION

In this inaugural installment of *Salt and Light: A Guide for Biblical Studies*, we celebrate our shared Mennonite and Brethren devotion to scripture as a guide to a life of faithful discipleship. Both individually, during this time of spiritual preparation, and later, in group study, let us commit ourselves to the words of God addressed to Joshua: “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance

with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful” (Joshua 1:8).

With regard to this verse, Rabbi Samuel ben Nachmani observed, “This is neither a duty nor a command, but a blessing.” As you read and ponder Joshua 1:1–11, reflect on the rabbi’s words. In what way is Joshua 1:8 a blessing? Do you consider the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, to be a blessing in your life? Do the Scriptures help you claim your place in the long chain of believers?

Close your time of reflection either by singing “How Firm a Foundation” or by listening to an online recording of the hymn.



## DISCOVER

Four decades have passed since God’s people were liberated from slavery in Egypt, but Joshua and Caleb are the lone survivors of the exodus. Forty years earlier the twelve spies sent by Moses into the Promised Land brought back glowing reports, but ten of them expressed fears that the inhabitants were too strong. Only Joshua and Caleb counseled bold action based on trust in God. When the people chose fear over trust, God condemned them to wander in the desert forty years until all but Joshua and Caleb had died, including Moses, their leader.

As these descendants of enslaved people prepare to cross the river into the Promised Land, the torch is passed from Moses to Joshua. In Joshua 1:1, Joshua is identified as Moses’ “assistant” or “helper.” (See also Numbers 27:18–23 for the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua.) Moses is frequently referred to as “the servant of the LORD.” By the end of the book of Joshua and the time of his death, Joshua, too, will be called “the servant of the LORD” (Joshua 24:29).

God draws a verbal map of the lands that the people will enter and possess: “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west

shall be your territory” (Joshua 1:3–4). Joshua’s task is to lead the people in this endeavor to receive God’s gift of land.

God promises no one will be able to oppose them, and that God will be present, as with Moses. In the face of this daunting task the Lord charges Joshua *three* times to be strong and courageous as he carries on in place of Moses (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9). We might ask, Is this a way of reinforcing God’s encouragement or does it demonstrate a lack of confidence in Joshua? Why does God have to encourage Joshua to be strong and courageous? Perhaps because Moses was a true giant (“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” Deuteronomy 34:10) while Joshua seems to be a more human figure. The heroes of the past, every bit as human as us, can sometimes seem superhuman, while we look on ourselves as all too human and frail.

How will the Lord equip Joshua for this task? Interestingly, God does not offer Joshua a military manual. Instead, he provides him with a book called the Torah, a Hebrew word that can be translated “law” or “instruction.” We can think of the Torah as “the Way,” because it guides the way through life. While the term would later refer to the first five books of our Bible, the complete first five books were likely not in existence at that point. In the time of Joshua, the “book of the law” (NRSVue) or “instruction scroll” (CEB) may have referred to the Ten Commandments, an early version of Deuteronomy, or to some collection of written instruction the community had come to observe.

Joshua was commanded to “meditate” on the Torah day and night (Joshua 1:8). It is not entirely clear what Joshua is supposed to do. Some English versions say he is to “recite” the Torah day and night. Meditation, like reading and reciting, was an oral activity. When used of animals, the Hebrew word *hagah* can refer to the “growling” of lions (Isaiah 31:4) or the “moaning” or “cooing” of doves (Isaiah 59:11). When Joshua meditates, he was to speak *and* act. Bible study results in action.

The chapter concludes with the reminder to the two and a half tribes who had already settled down on the far side of the Jordan that they still had obligations to the larger body, and must assist the other tribes in the taking of the land. Yet though they promise to fulfill their obligations, I wonder if it troubled Joshua they too chimed in with: “Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:18). Did they harbor doubts about their leader?



## CONNECT AND TRANSFORM

In his 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy announced that “the torch has been passed to a new generation.” But a scant three years later the torch was passed again to Lyndon Johnson. Many dismissed him as a southern racist; nevertheless as president Johnson signed major bills ending segregation in public places and employment, guaranteeing voting rights, and prohibiting discrimination in housing.

The fact is, the torch is constantly being passed from one generation to another—in nations, in families, and in churches.

My guess is that many of us taking part in this study had the torch passed to us, or perhaps are now considering how to pass the torch to another generation. Some of us may have felt intimidated by giants from the past, or else now we’re uncertain about those who will follow us.

In addition, we may be struggling with a legacy that’s alternately glorious, shameful, purposeful, or purposeless. We have inherited the actions of ancestors on both sides of the border separating the United States and Canada. When European immigrants claimed the land on this continent, First Nations and Native Americans lost land, a way of life, and life itself. Some of us have inherited both histories. I, for instance, am Hispanic, and my ancestors include both Spanish military officers and *campesinos* largely descended from the conquered native populations. Being partly the latter doesn’t take away any inherited guilt for descent from the former. There’s a responsibility that comes with pillage and plunder, a privilege that gives some an unacknowledged head start.

On top of all that, historians and sociologists talk about a radical change in society and the church that seems to happen every five hundred years or so, which works out to right about now. The drop in attendance, loss of younger families, and feelings of uncertainty that have only been exacerbated and sped along by the COVID-19 pandemic are all part of that.

So let me put a (temporary) Band-Aid on this struggle.

Be strong and courageous. And stick to the Word. It was good enough for Joshua so it ought to be good enough for us.



## TIPS FOR GROUP STUDY

### Ideas for Opening the Class

- Meet and greet each other as we begin this new quarter. Introduce this new curriculum, which is the joint effort of two similar yet different traditions. Discuss what differences and similarities we might expect with this transition.
- Invite someone to read the session's scripture passage aloud, with everyone else's Bibles shut. Bible listening is Bible reading. If possible, invite several members of the group to take turns reading from the passage.

### Class Session

- This session focuses on “passing the torch” from one generation to another and from one leader (Moses) to a new leader (Joshua). How does your church pass the torch? What activities, ceremonies, or presentations help children and young adults believe passing on the torch is not only an expectation, but a blessing? How open are congregational members to new leaders? How easily do leaders “let go” and allow new leaders to assume responsibility?
- God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous three times, and then the people tell him the same thing. How do you respond when someone reminds you of something several times? Does it feel like a lack of confidence in your ability to perform the task or an overabundance of encouragement? Is repetition strengthening or disheartening?
- In Joshua 1:3, God tells Joshua, “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you.” Is this something you feel comfortable hearing from God? Why, or why not?
- Regarding Joshua 1:6, a contributing Bible study group to the *Anabaptist Community Bible* wrote, “We see parallels to this in our own founding stories. The Anabaptist movement began in a context of oppression. When European and North American Anabaptists moved to new places, they often ended up oppressing others. Can we see how our identity has shifted? If so, what difference does it make in our behaviors and attitudes?” Do you know anything about the origins or previous occupants of the lands you and/or your church reside or are located on? Have you given thought to what sort of action is

needed with regards to the sins of the past, which we inherit in the present day? Where do you see yourself on the scale of sinner and sinned against? How important is this activity?

- Joshua was told several times to “be strong and courageous.” Regarding this passage the Anabaptist martyr Balthasar Hubmaier (1480–1528) wrote, “We should work courageously ‘and know that our work is not worthless to the Lord.’” When have you had to choose to be “strong and courageous”? How did you gain the courage to act? Have you ever felt encouraged by your faith community to be “strong and courageous”?

### **Ideas for Closing the Class**

- Sing “How Firm a Foundation.”
- Invite the group to read a closing prayer: *God of vision, strengthen us so we may truly be strong and courageous facing the future together. Amen.*