

STANDING AT THE JORDAN

JOSHUA - THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

by Doug Goins

In Joshua 2 we examined the saving faith of an individual, the Canaanite woman Rahab. Now in this passage the focus moves to the faith of an entire nation. As we study, please keep in mind that this book deals with much more than the history of what God did centuries ago for the Jews. It's also about each of our individual lives and the life of the church today, about what God wants to do here and now for those who trust him and who are open to his leading. The book of Joshua is about the victory of faith and the glory that comes to God when his people trust him and obey him.

The nineteenth-century British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli said, "The world was never conquered by intrigue; it was conquered by faith." The report of the spies to Joshua at the end of chapter 2 was virtually word-for-word the observations of Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute. And that report was not a report of intrigue, but words of faith. Joshua 2:24: "Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of us."

In the Christian life we are either overcomers or we will be overcome, either victors or we will be victimized. After all, God didn't save us to make us statues and put us on display in a museum. He saved us to make us soldiers, to move us forward by faith to claim our rich inheritance in Jesus Christ. Moses described that process perfectly, speaking to the nation of Israel prior to the conquest in Deuteronomy 6:23: "... and [God] brought us out from there [Egypt] in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers." Too many of us as God's people have the mistaken idea that salvation, being delivered from the bondage of Egypt, is all that is involved in the Christian life. But salvation is just the beginning. Both in our personal, spiritual growth and in our service for the Lord, we can apply the word that God spoke to Joshua later, after the initial conquest of the land: "...There remains yet very much land to be possessed" (Joshua 13:1). This theme from the book of Joshua is also a theme in the New Testament book of Hebrews, where the writer says, "Let us...go on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1-12).

The only way to go on is by faith. Faithlessness, or unbelief, says, "No, let's go back to where it's safe." But faith says, "Let's go forward to where God is working." Forty years before, Joshua and Caleb had assured the Jews with these words: "Let us go up at once, and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it." That's faith. But the people said that they weren't able to. That's faithlessness. That unbelief cost the nation forty years of discipline in the wilderness. The apostle John assures us today, "And this is the victory that has overcome the world---our faith" (1 John 5:4).

Ever since I was in high school, one of my passions has been the study of church history, especially Christian biography. I love reading about the lives of men and women whom God has used to challenge the church and change the world. That has been going on for two thousand years now. These Christians have all been very different from each other in their ethnic backgrounds, cultural settings, socioeconomic status, training, personalities, and all the ways that they served the Lord. But they had one thing in common: They believed God's promises, and they did what he told them to do. They were all men and women of faith, and God honored them because of that. One such saint of God profiled in Christian History Institute's *Glimpses* (Issue #59) is William Tyndale, the British theologian and Bible translator who was martyred because he was committed to making the Bible available in the English language so people could read it. He was a man who lived by faith.

God hasn't changed in all these years of church history, and the principle of faith hasn't changed. But what does seem to have changed is our individual attitudes as God's people. We no longer believe God and act by

faith in his promises. His promises never fail, but we can fail to live by the grace of God, and as a result, not enter into all that he has promised for us. Again, in the words of Moses, God has brought us out so that he might bring us in. But too often we are, in the words of the writer of Hebrews (3:19), "...not able to enter because of unbelief."

In the opening verses of Joshua 3, God illustrates for us three essentials for moving ahead by faith, claiming all that he has for us. This is what God desired for Israel and also what he desires for us. First, the Israelites were willing to wait on the Lord even when it was difficult to wait. Second, they were willing to follow the Lord unconditionally. And third, they were willing to consecrate themselves before the Lord. Joshua 3:1-6:

Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim, with all the people of Israel; and they came to the Jordan, and lodged there before they passed over. At the end of three days the officers went through the camp and commanded the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it, that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits [about one thousand yards]; do not come near it." And Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." And Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass on before the people." And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people.

These three days of waiting at the Jordan River were days of preparation for crossing it. They describe the kind of people that God wanted the Israelites to be and the kind of people he yearns for us to be. This issue of waiting is addressed in the last phrase of verse 1 and the first phrase of verse 2: "...before they passed over. At the end of three days...." If you've served in the armed forces, you're probably familiar with the phrase "Hurry up and wait." That's what Israel was experiencing at the Jordan. After the spies had returned from Jericho with their favorable report, Joshua had led the people on a march from Shittim to the Jordan. It was about a ten-mile journey; it would have taken them about a day to mobilize, travel, and arrive at the banks of the Jordan. Then they were ordered to make camp again, to await further instructions, and that wait was three days. The people were ready to move when the command was given, but then they were asked to wait for Joshua's instructions from the Lord to be transmitted through the officers.

As they waited, they had a growing awareness of the human impossibility of what God was asking them to do. The nation must have wondered what Joshua was working out in this interim period. They certainly couldn't swim across the river. They couldn't build enough boats or rafts to transport almost two million people, including women and children, across to the other side. Besides, either of those approaches would have made them sitting ducks for the Canaanite enemies on the other side. Remember that for more than six hundred years, the Hebrew people had been trying to imagine what lay beyond that river. For forty years they had also cultivated deep fears about the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. In addition, God intentionally brought them to the Jordan at the time of year when the river was swollen by the spring rains and by the melting snows from the Lebanon mountains. It was at this time, when the people were faced with tremendous difficulties and they knew that they were at the end of their resources, that God would be able to show his power.

There must have been a lot of conflicting thoughts going through the minds of the people waiting through those three days, just as there are for us when we're faced with our own inadequacy and impotence to have any effect whatsoever on circumstances. Some of them would have said, "Let's go back to Shittim." It was a lush oasis of acacia groves, a beautiful setting. Or, "Let's spread out with the two and a half tribes and take over Bashan, Gilead, and Moab [see [Discovery Paper 4456](#)]. We're already here, after all." And I would imagine that there were some super-spiritual people in the nation who said, "What we should do is organize everyone into endurance swimming classes---women, children, even sheep. We can make it across this river if we try hard enough and pray hard enough!" Whatever was going through their minds, for three days they were stuck there waiting for God's direction.

There is a similar tension for the disciples of Jesus implied at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts, after his resurrection and his ascension into heaven. Jesus had said, "...Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). And for forty days the disciples had to wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, the resource they needed to live a life of overcoming faith. Remember, the power of God was demonstrated for the church at Pentecost, and it would be demonstrated here for Israel on the fourth day at the Jordan in a miraculous crossing over into the promised land. But waiting on the Lord is hard to do.

I had an experience of waiting that was very difficult a number of years ago. Ed Woodhall and I were supposed to fly to Bogotá, Colombia to meet with the leadership of a prison ministry there. We had to make connections in Miami. It was a difficult trip that we didn't really want to make because we had to bring the bad news to our brothers and sisters in Colombia that we were not going to be involved in their ministry anymore, for important reasons. Also, it was a time when the Colombian drug lords were running the country, and American businessmen were being kidnapped off the streets. So we felt some fear and apprehension. But we knew that it was the right thing to do. So we left San Francisco at 7:00 a.m., and we were supposed to catch a 4:00 p.m. flight on to Bogotá in Miami, but because of mechanical problems we missed that flight and ended up having to wait for twenty-four hours in Miami.

Late that night, after a full day of traveling, we were in a shuttle bus being driven to north Miami to sleep in some fleabag hotel that the airline had grudgingly provided for us. We were not in the best of moods, to confess honestly. Ed and I were talking about what was going on: "Why is God doing this? What does it all mean?"

We were the last people to get off the bus. The Jamaican bus driver said to us, "You men are Christians, aren't you?"

"Yes," we replied.

He continued, "I asked God last week to bring me in contact with a Christian who could tell me how to accept Jesus."

Ed and I both said, "*That's* what's going on here!" We had the amazing pleasure of praying with this dear brother as he came to faith in Christ. Then God gave us the next day to get our own hearts straight, to pray together and plan together. We were anxious to get to Colombia and get out, yet God said, "Wait. I've got some things I want to accomplish."

In the period of waiting at the Jordan, God gave the nation of Israel two specific instructions. You could call these two instructions action-pattern orders that mark the lives of a people who are open to God's leading.

The first command was to follow Lord, and it was stated in a strange way. Up until then, the people of Israel had followed the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night as symbols of God's leading, presence, and protection in the wilderness. Now those symbols were going to be replaced by the ark of the covenant. Verses 2-4 and 6: "At the end of three days the officers went through the camp and commanded the people, 'When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it, that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come near it'...And Joshua said to the priests, 'Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass on before the people.' And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people." Notice Joshua and the officers did not say, "Follow us, men. We're crossing the river." This is not like a John Wayne movie.

The ark of the covenant is mentioned fifteen times in chapters 3 and 4, which focus on the crossing of the Jordan and the arrival in Canaan. The ark has fascinated people for more than three thousand years, even inspiring movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. A large box containing sacred objects, the ark was seen as the portable throne of the invisible God. The ark contained the Ten Commandments carved in stone that had been given to Moses at Mount Sinai. It also held the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Thus the ark symbolized both the covenant commitment that God had made to Israel and the covenant conditions that God had established for the people of Israel. The whole covenant relationship, an entire way of

life, would continue with them as they crossed the Jordan and entered Canaan. Inside the ark was also a jar of manna to remind the people that day after day for forty years God had met their physical needs.

The ark symbolized the presence and power of God with his people. The ark was the sign that God was leading them. They weren't just a migratory people optimistically yet futilely thinking that they could go into the land of Canaan. They had to know that they were God's people, being led by him. The ark also symbolized the specific teaching and direction that God had given to his people. They had the assurance of his guidance and leadership as they moved into the new, completely unfamiliar territory. If they didn't follow the Lord, as symbolized by the ark, they would get lost and disoriented; they wouldn't know where to go or how to live.

I've done a lot of backpacking in the Sierra Nevada in my adult life, and I know how difficult it is in the high country when you leave established trails and start off cross-country. You must have a good compass and a good topographical map that you follow, or you'll very easily get lost. The command in verses 3-4 has within it the promise that God would lead, guide, and teach them everything they would need to know as they crossed into Canaan, but they had to be willing to follow the ark.

The instruction to keep a thousand yards away from the ark is fascinating. It speaks for the need of some degree of separateness between the people and a holy God. There is precedent for that in the Scriptures. The people were commanded to never touch the ark, to never treat the things of God lightly. The ark was a holy piece of furniture from the tabernacle. It wasn't to be treated carelessly. And there is an implication for us today. God is our Abba, Father, our companion as we go through life, but we dare not relate to him casually or superficially as a "good buddy." Listen to the writer of Hebrews in 12:28-29: "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire." God is not just "the man upstairs."

Also of importance for Israel at this point was the logistical issue of staying far enough away from the ark so that it could be seen as it was held up by the Levites during the crossing of the Jordan. The ark was to lead the way across the treacherous river and into unfamiliar land, and therefore the eyes of the people would be focused on the presence and power of God and not on their dangerous circumstances as they crossed the Jordan River.

If we are to be people who are willing to follow the Lord today, we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. Remember, his offer of salvation to each of us was basically a call to begin a lifelong process of following him. The writer of Hebrews describes following Jesus Christ as running a race with perseverance, "...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author [pioneer] and perfecter of our faith..." (12:2). He pioneered the way; he has been across the Jordan and in the unfamiliar territory himself; he has been tempted in every way that we can possibly be tempted. For Jesus, the Jordan was his own suffering, humiliation, death, and then resurrection for our sakes. Jesus can say, "I have been there." And his being the perfecter of our faith means that he goes with us, teaching and enabling and encouraging us.

Last night I got a call from my son who lives in Denver. When he moved there he started studying to take an exam scheduled for December to become a securities broker. He had told me a couple of weeks before how hard it was. He had a seven-hundred-page book that he had to learn for an objective test, and he shared his apprehension at the prospect of taking that test. But he told me some good news last night. He said, "Dad, there's a guy in the office here named Andy. Andy just took the test a year ago and passed. It is possible to pass it! Andy's saved all his notes and all the practice tests from a course he took in preparation. And he told me he'd work with me and help me get ready for it." This man has been through it, and he is walking along with my son through the process. That's the kind of God we're following in the person of Jesus.

This issue of following spiritual leadership is difficult. I think all of us as people of faith struggle with who it is we are to follow or watch for spiritual leadership. Over the years here at PBC I've had countless conversations with people about this very issue. I've reminded them that the pastors and elders of this church are given the responsibility to set a godly example of following Jesus, but this church doesn't belong to the pastors and elders. It belongs to Jesus Christ. We human leaders have feet of clay. We will disappoint people individually and collectively. Jesus Christ is the only one who will not let them down. Only Christ is capable

of leading us through difficult waters, providing ultimate direction. That's why we need to know him personally and intimately, why we need to know his word, and why obedience to that word is so critical. We are claiming the promised land, following our leader. We live in personal relationship with him, but he is Jesus the Lord, and we're his loving followers. This loyalty goes way beyond the 1970's confession of faith of the band The Doobie Brothers when they sang, "Jesus is just all right with me."

Now we come to the second specific instruction given to the Israelites as they waited at the edge of the Jordan. Remember, it's an action-pattern order that would mark the lives of a people open to God's leading. Joshua's message to the people was both a command and a promise, and the fulfillment of the promise depended on their obedience to the command. Verse 5: "And Joshua said to the people, 'Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.' " Some of God's promises are unconditional, and all we have to do is believe them, while other promises have expectations and consequences attached. In meeting these expectations we are not earning God's blessing. Rather, we are making certain that our hearts are ready for God's blessing. The promise was that God would demonstrate miraculous power, but it was contingent on the people's willingness to consecrate or sanctify themselves.

In the Old Testament, sanctification was usually tied to ritual cleansing, and God gave very specific instructions for ceremonial cleanliness. If the experience of Israel at Mount Sinai was the pattern, then "sanctify yourselves" meant that everyone was to bathe and change their clothes, at least in part. In the Bible this imagery of washing one's body and putting on fresh clothes symbolized a new beginning with the Lord. Sin is a picture of defilement. God has to cleanse us before we can truly follow him. When Jacob made a new beginning with the Lord and returned to Bethel, he and his entire family washed themselves and changed their garments. And after King David confessed his sin with Bathsheba, he bathed, changed his clothes, and then worshiped God.

This imagery is carried over into the New Testament. Colossians 3:9-10 speaks of the necessity of being forgiven for sin, putting away the old patterns of behavior and attitudes, allowing those things to be washed away by the blood of Christ. Then there is the wonderful invitation to put on the new person, to clothe ourselves in the righteousness of Jesus. That passage gives many practical examples of this in terms of compassion, kindness, humility, and *agape* love expressed toward those around us.

Whenever we face new opportunities, God's voice calls us to sanctify ourselves. God calls his people to holiness, purity of life, and separation from sin. For us today, the invitation to be cleansed means that we come once again to claim the cleansing of the precious blood of Jesus Christ, which washes away all defilement, uncleanness, and sin. That requires a willingness from us to admit our sin, to live an examined life, to be open to truth. It means opening ourselves to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, because after our confession of sin, repentance, and experiencing forgiveness, then the Holy Spirit enables us to be used by God.

One of my delights as a pastor is watching men and women open themselves increasingly to God's presence and power in their lives. A number of those folks through the years have included me in this process of consecration or sanctification as they have confessed particular sins that held them in bondage---for years in some instances---and prayed for God's cleansing. There is an important spiritual principle in Joshua 3:5: God has chosen not to work in all his fullness in the lives of people who are unwilling to open their hearts to his cleansing and his leadership. God will work wonders in us and through us if we sanctify ourselves.

I recently had occasion to reread the wedding ceremony in the Presbyterian Book of Order, and there is a wonderful invocation that opens that service. The pastor prays for the couple, "Sanctify them, O Lord. Make them fit for their new estate." That describes a wedding as a time when two people need God's cleansing from sin and need his leading as they enter into the covenant relationship of marriage.

In Joshua 3:1-6 God's promises are being fleshed out, not only in the life of Israel, but also in our own lives as we are willing to wait on the Lord, to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, to sanctify ourselves. Let me close with some questions for you.

First, are you struggling with your own helplessness, impotence, or inadequacy as you face your own Jordan

River or Jericho or Canaanite enemies? In this season of waiting, is there impatience, frustration, and resentment in your heart that God is not moving more quickly and doing what you want him to do on your timetable?

Second, are you following the Lord Jesus unconditionally, completely, wholeheartedly; or are there other claims on you toward which you feel obligation and responsibility apart from the Lord, other leadership that you're following?

Finally, are you willing to sanctify yourself today, to confess sin or uncleanness that needs to be washed by the blood of Jesus? Are you willing to consecrate yourself anew to God's purposes for you, to experience the wonders that he wants to accomplish in you and through you in the people that you live in community with and work with?

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