

Bound for the Promised Land

Joshua 3:1-17

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Have you ever seen a miracle with your physical eyes? I don't mean like the birth of a baby, as awesome as that is, but I mean like one we will read about in Joshua 3, one that defies the laws of nature. I don't know about you, but I have never seen one. I am not saying they don't happen today. I am simply saying that with my physical eyes, I have never seen that kind of miracle. I have seen some amazing things but not a miracle.

Yet, with the eyes of faith, we have seen miracles. With our eyes of faith, we have seen Jesus live a sinless life, die on the cross for our sin, and then rise from the dead. We have seen the spiritually dead brought to life. Through faith, we have seen these things happen. They are amazing!

However, I dare say that any of us have seen with our physical eyes and heard with our ears, at the word of God, the water of a river cut off, damned up, piled up 20 miles, three million people pass through that river bed on dry land into the Promised Land, and then the river resume flowing.

Believe it or not, you're going to see this one day. There is a river that will be parted for you so that you will may pass into your Promised Rest, Eternal Inheritance, and Promised Land. It is going to happen if you have faith in Christ alone. Let me show you what I mean.

We need to pick up where we left off last Sunday. The spies have returned and reported to Joshua all that they had seen in order to prepare for war. Everything we have been reading in Joshua is preparing the people for war. They are preparing to go into battle.

As I have mentioned in previous sermons, many Christians and non-Christians struggle with the conquest of Canaan. Let's face it. This book deals with violence and the harsh realities of war.

In our politically correct society, it is hard for many people to reconcile this story. For our younger generation, who have been raised on political correctness in government schools, it is difficult to find proper categories in your mind for Joshua. If the Holy Spirit has not created the proper theological categories in your heart and mind and you are not a good student of God's word, you will struggle.

Furthermore, the historical background of Israel's warfare in the Old Testament is carried over into the New Testament with the idea of spiritual warfare. As Christians, we are in a spiritual war. We are exhorted to put on the armor of God so we may be victorious in the spiritual battles in our lives. The New Testament teaches us that we do not fight with flesh and blood as in the Old Testament. Instead, we fight against the spiritual forces of evil and the schemes of the devil.

Now, I do not have time to unpack spiritual warfare this morning, but hopefully, as we move deeper into Joshua, we can look at somethings.

The question I want us to answer this morning is: *How do we follow our King into spiritual battles?* We are not waging physical warfare as Israel did, so how do we follow our King into spiritual battles?

The True and Better Joshua is still leading His people into battle. He has won the war through His death and resurrection, but there are battles to be fought. Our marching orders are to fulfill the *Great Commission* where our King says:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We are to fulfill the *Great Commission* by living out the *Great Commandment* in Matthew 22:37-40, which says:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

The Great Commission does not commission us to take lives. Instead, we are to take up our cross and lay our lives down for the saints and those who have yet to believe in Jesus. So, how do we do that? *How do we follow our King into these spiritual battles?* We are going to answer that question from Joshua 3:1-17 this morning.

I. We Must Fix Our Eyes on Our King (Joshua 3:1-8)

Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and they set out from Shittim. And they came to the Jordan, he and all the people of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over. ² At the end of three days the officers went through the camp ³ and commanded the people, "As soon as 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. ⁴ Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits in length. Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before." ⁵ Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." ⁶ And Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.

There are three exhortations in these verses that call for single-minded devotion and the concentration of our attention.

First, the officers exhort the people to be prepared to follow the ark of the covenant as soon as they saw the priests carrying the ark. The people were to stand 1000 yards away from the ark. The officers tell us in v. 4, that this was in order that the people may see the ark and know the way to go.

Let me give us some background here about the importance of the *Ark of the Covenant*. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments, which was the covenant God made with His people at Mt. Sinai. The Ark was the physical representation of that covenant. The Ark was a box covered in gold. It had rings on the sides of the box for long poles to slide through so that Levitical Priests could transport the Ark from location to location.

On top of the Ark were two golden angels (cherubim) whose wings stretched out toward one another and touched at the tips of the wings. This was the *Mercy Seat* of the God. *The Mercy Seat* was where Yahweh's

presence resided with His people. It was like His throne. It was also the place where the blood of the Lamb was sprinkled on *The Day of Atonement* for the forgiveness of sin.

The Ark was then kept in the Holy of Holies, which was in the center of the Tabernacle. This was the most holy place. The tabernacle worked out from there, kind of like in concentric circles where certain people could go. Only the High Priest that was selected that year could go in the Holy of Holies. Outside of the Holy of Holies was the Holy Place where the priests who served could go. Outside of that was the Outer Courtyard where men could stand. Then outside of that was a place where the women could stand. Then on the outside was where the tribes were positioned around the tabernacle. When the tent of the Tabernacle was erected, the tribes of Israel would set up camp according to tribes by encircling the Tabernacle.

Everything about the tabernacle was to teach Israel the importance of God in their lives. It taught them that the *covenant* of God, the *worship* of God, the *holy presence* of God, and *the word* of God was at the very *center* of the lives of the *people of God*.

When Israel was traveling, the Tabernacle was taken down, and the Ark of the Covenant was placed on those long golden poles and carried by the Levitical priests at the front of the nation of Israel. In this way, the people of God learned to follow God, and this is what we see in v. 4.

Let's keep going. Remember I said there were three exhortations in these verses.

In the second exhortation, Joshua exhorted the people of Israel, and then he exhorted the priests. His exhortations were short and sweet.

Look in v. 5 at Joshua's exhortation to the people, "*Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.*" The Hebrew word of *consecrate* means to *make holy* or to *sanctify*. Then he told the priests to pick up the Ark and begin the journey.

I want to focus on the consecration of the people. For the people were to *make themselves holy*. This was an external moral act of obedience to the command of God aimed at the heart change.

Their external consecration meant they were to wash and change clothes. It meant only eating certain foods. Finally, it meant the people must abstain from sexual relations. All of these things were to cause the people of God to think about God and therefore grow in their internal devotion to God. These external acts of morality were limited in changing the heart of the people, but there were important acts of obedience.

Next, look in vv. 7-8:

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. ⁸ And as for you, command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'"

The last exhortation was by Yahweh. His exhortation was to Joshua. He let Joshua know that He was going to exalt him in the eyes of the people. The purpose was not simply to exalt Joshua but to affirm his leadership in the eyes of Israel so that they would trust in God's word given to them through Joshua. As the people looked to Joshua, they were in essence looking to God. He represented God to them. He gave them God's word. He mediated between them and God. His role was of critical importance. They needed to trust Joshua just as they did Moses. God was making sure the people could see His leadership through the leadership of Joshua.

What are these first eight verses teaching us? First, they are teaching us to fix our eyes on Jesus. In other words, as we prepare to fulfill the Great Commission and live out the Great Commandment, there will be spiritual battles. The New Covenant established in the gospel of Jesus Christ must be at the center of our

lives. The worship of God, the word of God, and the presence of God given to each Christian given the Holy Spirit must guide each follower of Jesus.

In our spiritual battles, we must fix our eyes on Christ. We must follow Him where He leads us in life because there is going to be the fight of faith that will go on in our hearts and minds.

There may be times when we wonder if we are going to make it through the battles, but we must hold fast. We must trust God to see us through. The temptation will be like the people of Israel at the Massah and Meribah and complain against the Lord and lack faith to follow Him.

It is easy to trust God when it seems like things are going our way. When things are easy, but when we come to the overflowing rivers in our lives, and it seems like there is no way Jesus will see this through, we will trust God.

Have you ever stumbled into sin when you have been following Jesus? At some point in time, all of us have stumbled. Did you think that Jesus would have answered your prayer or prayers if you have been more holy, more consecrated, or more sanctified? If you are like me, you probably thought that you just were not holy enough.

Let me give you some good news from our Ultimate Joshua. In John 17:14-19, just before Jesus went to the cross. Jesus prayed:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify [consecrate] them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ [Here the Great Commission in v. 18] As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. [There is our commission, and then He consecrates us based on His consecration] ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified [consecrated] in truth.

Do you know what the good news of John 17 teaches us about Jesus' consecration of us? The True and Better Joshua not only calls us to be sanctified, but He does the sanctifying for us. He makes us holy by the shedding of His blood on the cross. He sprinkles us with His blood, and we dwell in the mercy of God.

Friends, relax, Jesus has made you holy and given you the desire to pursue Him in holiness. Fix your eyes on Jesus and pursue Him. When you pursue Jesus, the holiness will come. Jesus is your holiness that makes you holy, so fix your eyes on Him and follow Him.

To face the spiritual battles of our lives, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, and next, we must believe the words of our King. Look in vv. 9-13.

II. We Must Believe the Words of Our King (Joshua 3:9-13)

And Joshua said to the people of Israel, "Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God." ¹⁰ And Joshua said, "Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. ¹¹ Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. ¹² Now therefore take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man. ¹³ And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the

waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap."

In this text, second-hand faith is becoming first-hand faith. The people had heard stories of God's great deliverances all of their lives. This new generation of Israelites had seen a few amazing acts of God, but most of them had not seen the parting of the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, and Moses descend from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments. All of these stories were second-hand stories of God's great acts through Moses. They were second-hand faith.

Now they had a new leader in Joshua, and some of the people rightly wondered if this guy was going to be able to lead like Moses did. They may have wondered if God was really with him. They may have wondered if they could trust that he was really telling them the word of God. These were all legit concerns.

So, in v. 9, Yahweh begins to turn second-hand faith into first-hand faith. Notice what Joshua says, *"Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God."*

The Hebrew word for *listen* in v. 9 does not simply mean hear with your ears. The full meaning of this Hebrew word is to hear with faith and then act with obedience. The time for only hearing with their ears was over now. They had to act in obedience to their faith.

Then in v. 10, Joshua says, *"Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you."* He wants them to know that Yahweh is not like the gods of the land they are going to possess. Joshua exalts Yahweh and sets Him apart from the false gods of the people of Canaan. Yahweh is not some god made out of wood and stone. No, He is the Living God.

Then in v. 11, he says, *"Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan."* He is not only the Living God, but He is the God who is *Lord of all the earth*. Everything in all of creation submits to His rule. At His command, the water will stop flowing. At His command, it will stand in a heap twenty miles upstream. At His command, the river bed will dry up so the priests and the people may pass over on dry ground. At His very word, the river will be released and begin to flow once more.

Friends, everything in this text teaches us that even the natural elements obey the word of the Lord. The question is: Do you? Do you obey God's word?

You may reject God's word for a while, but you cannot reject it forever. If you are resisting God, then you need to know that in His kindness, He is giving you time to repent and place your faith in Him.

Philippians 2 teaches us that ultimately every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. You will willingly repent and place your faith in Jesus, or you will wait until it is too late and in terror fall on your knees and confess that Jesus is Lord. Your second-hand faith won't save you. You must act in faith and obey the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, to face the spiritual battles in our lives, we must obey the words of our King. It is not enough to simply hear we must obey. Look in vv. 14-17.

III. We Must Obey the Words of Our King (Joshua 3:14-17)

In vv. 14-17 is one of the most amazing miracles that is recorded in the Scriptures. Follow along as I read:

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest),

So, the priests are carrying the Ark into the Jordan River at flood stage. According to Dr. Dale Ralph Davis, the Jordan River was probably about a mile wide at the place where Israel crossed. He says the river was a swift-moving torrent.¹ This would be like crossing the Mississippi River at its widest point. So, if you thought this was like the Skunk River during summer, you need to get that image out of your mind. This was like the section of the Mississippi River, where the river is one mile wide and very deep.

¹⁶ the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷ Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

When the priests stepped out in faith and into the swiftly moving current, the river not only stopped flowing, but the river bed dried up. Then some twenty miles upriver, at the city of Adam, the water piled up in a heap.

This was the Red Sea experience for the new generation of Israelites. Now their second-hand faith was first-hand faith. They believed and obeyed God's command, and they witnessed Yahweh do wonders right before their eyes.

Friends, the Lord is still doing these wonders. He is still sending His people through the waters into the True Promised Land. How is that happening, you may ask. You are probably wondering when was the last time you witnessed a river parted at flood stage, and God performed a miracle to safely lead His people through the water.

John Bunyan helps us see this amazing miracle. Bunyan, in his allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ended his story with the pilgrim's crossing the river of death into the Promised Land.

I do not want to allegorize this passage. That is not my intent, but I think Bunyan hits on something very true. To enter into our True Promised Rest, our Promised Inheritance, the True Promised Land, we must all pass through the river of death.

I want to close by read a portion of Rousseaux Brasseur's book, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Poetic Retelling of John Bunyan's Classic Tale*. I want to read the last part of the story where Christian and Hopefully cross the river of death into Beulah Land . . .²

Brothers and sisters, when you die, you will pass through the river of death. It may be a hard spiritual battle for you. You may fear death to the point where your faith is greatly tested. I think through this pandemic, many people have come face-to-face with the fragility of life. They know that death may be a virus away.

The good news for those who have placed their faith in Christ alone for salvation will pass safely through the river because Jesus has passed through this river for them. He will part the river, and they will safely make it to the other side where eternal glory waits for the people of God.

However, those who do not trust Christ or who trust in Christ plus place their faith in their good works will not survive the river of death. They will be swallowed up by death and spend eternity in hell. Friend, if you

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words*, from *Focus On The Bible Series*, 36.

² Rousseaux Brasseur, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Poetic Retelling of John Bunyan's Classic Tale*, 192-196.

have not trusted Christ or are hoping that God will save you because you have sanctified yourself, you need to repent of your sin of not trusting in Christ alone and fix your eyes on Jesus and look full in His wonderful face. Then the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.