

3. Crossing the Jordan

3/8/2007

If there is any Book of the Bible brings forth more challenges to all of us about faith in God than others, it would be the Book of Joshua. We see the examples of individual faith in God as well as the whole nation of Israel.

We need to keep in mind that this Book deals with much more than ancient history. We can learn about our lives and the life of the church today. The Book of Joshua is about the victory of faith and the glory that comes to God when His people trust and obey.

While we live as Christians, either we are overcomers or we're overcome, a victor or victim. God never promises us a rainbow life or a rose garden paradise while we walk with Jesus. Actually, God would rather make us to be soldiers and move us forward by faith to claim our rich inheritance in Jesus Christ.

Too many of God's people have the mistaken idea that salvation is all that's involved in the Christian life; however, salvation is only the beginning. Both in our personal spiritual growth and in our service for the Lord, there are so many things yet to be possessed.

Crossing the Jordan River into the land of Canaan was a major turning point as far as the faith of the Israelites was concerned. Almost forty years earlier the Israelites had faced a similar crisis, but they had failed because of their unbelief and carnality.

Invading the land of Canaan by crossing the Jordan River took a great deal more faith because, having once crossed the river, there would be no possibility of escape. Once in the land, they would have to face the enemy with their armies, chariots and fortified cities. They had to depend on the Lord for their lives to survive and inherit the riches He had for them in the land that was promised to them long ago.

A. PREPARING TO CROSS THE JORDAN

Joshua 3:1-4 Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over. 2 So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp; 3 and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. 4 Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before."

Like Moses before him, Joshua received his orders from the Lord, and he obeyed them by faith. I am sure that you all remember what I said about faith last week. "Faith is not believing in spite of evidence but obeying in spite of consequence."

Faith is not a passive feeling. It is an active determined force. Faith allows us to believe and anticipate God WILL do something and He WILL provide results.

Obviously, Joshua was an early riser who spent the first hours of the day in communion with God. It's impossible to live by faith yet ignore the Word of God and prayer,

because faith is nurtured both by prayerful worship and through the Word of God. The people God uses and blesses know how to discipline their bodies so that they can give themselves to the Lord in the early morning hours.

The ark of God was mentioned sixteen times in chapters 3 and 4. As we all know, the ark represents the presence of God in the OT. The ark was going before the people as an encouragement to their faith, because it meant that their God was going before them and opening up the way.

B. THE MARCHING ORDER

Joshua 3:5-8 And Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." 6 Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people. 7 And the Lord said to Joshua, "This day 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 You shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.'"

Joshua told them to prepare themselves spiritually. Some of God's promises are unconditional and all we have to do is believe them. Other promises require that we meet certain conditions. In meeting these conditions, we're not earning God's blessing; rather, we're making sure our hearts are ready for God's blessing.

God is going to place Joshua in the position of Moses in front of the Israelites. Both Moses and Joshua had received their authority from the Lord before these miracles occurred, but the miracles gave them stature before the people. It takes both authority and stature to exercise effective leadership.

C. THE PROMISE OF GOD – THE WORD OF FAITH

Joshua 3:9-13 So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God." 10 And Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites: 11 Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan. 12 Now therefore, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe. 13 And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap."

Joshua didn't magnify himself. Rather he magnified the Lord and His gracious blessings to the nation. True spiritual leadership focuses the eyes of God's people on the Lord and His greatness not upon the person himself or herself. Joshua didn't give the people a "religious pep talk." He simply reminded them of the promises of God – the Word of faith – and encouraged them to trust and obey.

God's commandments are His enablements to us, and God's promises do not fail.

I asked you to underline a part of v10 – "the living God is among you". We will find out how God was among His people.

D. GOD'S MIRACLE BEFORE THEIR EYES

Joshua 3:14-17 So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, 15 and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), 16 that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. 17 Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.

With the faith in their hearts, the priests who carried the ark of God went straight to the Jordan River. The rest of two millions were about 3000 feet behind following them. As I said it before, the ark represents the presence of God was leading the procession for the people to follow.

I was told that during most of the year, the Jordan River was about a hundred feet wide. But at the spring flood season, the river overflowed its banks and became a mile wide. As soon as the priests bearing the ark put their feet into the river, the water stopped flowing and stood like a wall about twenty miles away upstream, near a city called Adam. It was a miracle of God in response to the faith of the people.

Unless we step out in faith and "get our feet wet," we're not likely to make much progress in living for Christ and serving Him.

While the Israelites were crossing the Jordan and until everyone crossed, the ark was in the middle of the river bed with the priest. God was before them, among them and behind them. Like that, Jesus is among us. I am sure you all remember what it says in Isaiah and Matthew:

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

Matthew 1:23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

Jesus is the fulfillment of the ark.

When God opened the Red Sea, Moses lifted his rod obediently. When Israel crossed the Jordan River, it was the obedient feet of the people stepping out in faith. Unless we are willing to step out in faith and obey His Word, God will not open the way for us.

E. CROSSING THE JORDAN

Joshua 4:1-18 And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying: 2 "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from every tribe, 3 and command them, saying, 'Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.' " 4 Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; 5 and Joshua said to them: "Cross over before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan,

and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, 6 that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' 7 Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever." 8 And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the Lord had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. 9 Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day. 10 So the priests who bore the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the Lord had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua; and the people hurried and crossed over. 11 Then it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over, that the ark of the Lord and the priests crossed over in the presence of the people. 12 And the men of Reuben, the men of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses had spoken to them. 13 About forty thousand prepared for war crossed over before the Lord for battle, to the plains of Jericho. 14 On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they had feared Moses, all the days of his life. 15 Then the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, 16 "Command the priests who bear the ark of the Testimony to come up from the Jordan." 17 Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan." 18 And it came to pass, when the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord had come from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet touched the dry land, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before.

Can you imagine being priests who carried the ark of God and standing in the middle of the flooded Jordan River, yet it was held back by the power of God? I bet it was an awesome sight.

Israel was now on the other side of the Jordan – in the Promised Land. What is life in the Promised Land like? Is it one glorious vacation time after another? No! It was a place of battle, but most of all, it was a place of trust – they knew they had to trust God with every thing they had, because the challenges only got bigger in the Promised Land – but so did the blessings from God.

Twelve stones were put into the water of death. Those twelve stones were placed in the riverbed of the Jordan to speak of the death of Christ. And the twelve stones taken out of Jordan River and put on the west bank of the river represent the resurrection of Christ.

This heap of twelve stones was a reminder of what God did for His people. But to an unbeliever, the heap of twelve stones was simply another stone pile.

We often fail in our trust of God because we forget the great things He has done, and often the faith of our children is weak because they have never been told how great God is and how real His working is in our lives.

It's unfortunate that this memorial at Gilgal gradually lost its spiritual meaning and instead became a shrine of idol worship where the Jews sinned against God by worshipping there. The Prophet Hosea condemned the people for worshipping at Gilgal instead of at Jerusalem in Hosea, and Amos echoed his warnings in Amos 4. Unless we teach the next generation the truth about the Lord, they will turn away and start following the world.

We need to be careful about handling the past. Glorifying the past is a good way to freeze us in the present and rob us of the future God could bring to us. Future generations need reminders of what God has done in history, but these reminders must also strengthen their faith and draw them closer to the Lord.

F. THE MEMORIAL OF GOD'S POWER

Joshua 4:19-24 Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. 20 And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal. 21 Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?' 22 then you shall let your children know, saying, 'Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land'; 23 for the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over, 24 that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever."

Gilgal will become their base of operations for the conquest of the entire Promised Land. It was appropriate that the first work at Gilgal was to set up a memorial to God's great works.

There was obviously a purpose in the memorial stones for the people of Israel themselves. It is so easy for us to forget the great miracles God has performed on our behalf.

It is easy for us to think that the best days of our Christian experience are behind us. We must remember them as a point of faith, so we can trust God for greater and greater works in the future because we have seen and experienced His past faithfulness.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) Too many of God's people have the mistaken idea that salvation is all that's involved in the Christian life; however, salvation is only the beginning. Both in our personal spiritual growth and in our service for the Lord, there are so many things yet to be possessed.

2) Unless we are willing to step out in faith and obey His Word, God cannot open the way for us.

3) We often fail in our trust of God because we forget the great things He has done and often the faith of our children is weak because they have never been told how great God is and how real His working is in our lives.