

Israel's Test and Triumph

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[0:00] Joshua chapter 3, and we can read the words of verse 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, 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 towards the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off and the people passed over opposite Jericho.

I'd like us tonight to look at two things in relation to this passage. We are familiar with the phrase taking the plunge.

When perhaps we face a challenging situation and taking that necessary step is difficult and can fill us with fear and trepidation.

[1:33] And it can be quite disconcerting, whatever it might be. So if I were to ask you, tell me a moment in your life when you remember taking that plunge, that symbolic step into uncharted waters.

What did it feel like? Well, from the perspective of the Israelites, they do just that, quite literally.

But by faith, they also take the plunge. This passage is strategic in lots of ways in terms of the history of Israel.

It represents a turning point in the history of the Israel of God. Why is that? Well, because they arrive here at a symbolic landmark.

It is, of course, the River Jordan. And it marks the boundary of the promised land. It's the dividing line. Indeed, this river is all that stands between the people of Israel and the land flowing with milk and honey.

[2:49] But there's one problem. They have to cross this river. They can't bypass it. They can't build a bridge across it.

They must go through it. If they are to possess the land, then they must enter the land. They can only enjoy the blessings of the promised land by entering the promised land.

And this is their designated route. And so they must take a step of obedience. The focus is very much on the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant.

They are, in a particular way, to lead by example and to take the plunge, to dip their feet into the edge of the waters.

We're not talking about dipping one's toe in the water. No, we are talking about plunging one's feet into the fast-flowing river that is the Jordan at springtime.

[4:02] Should they do that, then the Lord will part the waters. Not unlike the Red Sea crossing. But we must make a distinction.

This is a river, if you like, in space. And God is going to cease the flow so that the people of God can cross over and receive, by the grace of God, in all of its sufficiency, their inheritance.

So tonight I want us to try and place ourselves in the sandals of the Israelites. I want you to try and imagine what it must have been like to be there.

But there is a great deal of symbolic significance in this passage. There is much to teach you and I. There is much of life's challenges here.

And perhaps some of us tonight are in a situation where we are being asked to take the plunge. Perhaps on Monday morning you are going to be facing a particularly challenging scenario, perhaps over coming days or weeks or months.

[5 : 17] There are situations to overcome. There are difficulties that must be faced and engaged with. There is no alternative route.

Well, this passage is for your encouragement. Because this marks a challenging, demanding test for the Israelites. So picture it.

They are not far from the promised land. But between them and the land of promise, as we read, is a deep, fast-flowing river. It's overflowing its banks.

Why is all of this recorded for us? Well, because it matters. What does it convey to us from a theological perspective? Well, a great deal about covenant theology.

And the Israelites have a great deal to learn about their covenant God, who is leading them into these uncharted, fast-flowing waters.

[6 : 20] They have not passed this way before. But they are to trust. They are to obey. For there is no other way. So how are they to do that?

Well, by trusting unreservedly in God. Exercising faith. And going forward.

What lies at the very heart of covenant theology? Well, Moses has taught them much in relation to this. As has Joshua.

It is this, the great principle, that blessing follows obedience. And this step of faith requires no small measure of trust on the part of the Israelites.

They are to commit to God. They are to have confidence in those who lead them and who guide them.

[7 : 25] And ultimately, they are all to take a necessary leap of faith. The priests in particular are to plunge their feet into these fast-flowing waters.

And as the waters part, so they will be led safely through and enter the land of promise and receive their divine inheritance.

Well, is this not a picture of the Christian life? Might some of us be standing at the banks of a symbolic Jordan tonight? There is a great difficulty to overcome.

There are pressure points and problems and issues to overcome. How do I get from here to there? Why doesn't God provide a bypass?

Perhaps some of the Israelites were asking that kind of thing. They might have been saying to Joshua, Well, this is not how Moses did it back then.

[8 : 33] We've been told that Moses parted the waters in a particular way so that the Israelites were asked to stand still.

But God has a plan, has a purpose. And if they are to understand that blessing follows obedience, then they must take that step of obedience.

They must submit. They must commit without compromise. So for us, perhaps some of us, perhaps you this evening, you're afraid to dip your feet into the waters of your own challenges and difficulties at the moment.

Life is like that. And if there was another way, then we would opt for it. But God is saying to us, trust me. I will lead you and I will guide you through this particular difficulty.

Well, again, this passage is for our encouragement as we mull over these things. Again, let's look at this from an Israelite perspective. The promised land is but a stone's throw away from them.

[10:00] They can see it, we are told here, but they are not yet there. They have this river to overcome. Now, it's not a river of any significant breadth, we are told, but it is very deep.

And if you can imagine the snow that's melting, there's a thaw. The spring rains are pouring down. And the river is on the rise.

And it's overflowing its banks. How terrifying must it have been for the Israelites, seeing this river flowing at a ferocious speed.

Imagine what it must have been like standing by the edge of this river, barely able to hear your own voice. The thunderous sound of roaring water.

It's a frightening prospect. If you've walked through the castle grounds, and you're walking along the Creed River, when the river is in spit, you can barely hear yourself speak.

[11:08] So imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites. It's a daunting thought. They have had three days, rather, to come to terms with the journey ahead.

For some, the river would have appeared like an insurmountable mountain to climb, a burden, an obstacle, a hurdle to be overcome.

But from God's perspective, the river bursting its banks represents an opportunity to demonstrate his sovereign power and majesty.

And it's a window of opportunity like no other for the Israel of God to trust in the God of Israel. So this marks a designated route.

This is the ultimate test as they enter the promised land. A designated route through which the Israelites would have to cross.

[12:14] As I said previously, no alternative routes, no bypass, no underpass, no causeway, no bridge. God alone will lead them through these waters.

Miraculously, yes, of course. But God will leave the Israelites with more than a measure of responsibility as well. A test is not a test without some degree of responsibility.

But through this test, they will learn. And life at this juncture for the Israelites is a steep learning curve.

What does it mean to trust in God? Well, break down the letters of the word trust. And you have a wonderful definition. Taking refuge under severe trial.

That is what is expected of the Israelites. They are given every exhortation to do just that. To take refuge in the Lord their God under the severe trial that is the river Jordan.

[13:27] They are to have faith in him. They are to rely on him. They are to fully depend on him. They are to take a step of obedience.

They are to submit. And through all of this, the Lord will bring blessing. The priests, as the spotlight falls on them, bearing the Ark of the Covenant here, are to walk ahead of the people of Israel, in front of them.

And they are to literally dip or plunge their feet into the dark, deep, fast-flowing waters of the Jordan. And notice the attention to detail in the narrative.

The soles of their feet are to rest in the waters. And it's at that point, and at that point only, that the waters will recede and be cut off and hold back.

What is going on? Well, the wonderful overlap. The two complementary components of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

[14:46] Dovetail together beautifully, hand in hand. Perhaps, as I said a moment ago, the Israelites expected these waters to part, as the Red Sea had for a previous generation, with very little required on their part.

You know, sometimes we think like that. We look ahead and we think it will be fine. It will all work out. And some people have this *que sera sera* philosophy.

Whatever will be, will be. It will work out in the end. But sometimes God will intervene to test his people.

There are trials and there are tribulations. There are pressure points along the way through which he will test. Through which he will refine the faith conviction of his own children.

Perhaps some of the Israelites are saying to Joshua, Well, Joshua, what are you waiting for? Will you not follow the example of Moses? Will you not just stretch out your hand over the waters and divide the waters as Moses did?

[16:08] And then we'll just walk through. Not so. Joshua has the responsibility as God's great leader.

He has been commissioned as the leader of the people of Israel. He tells them that God is leaving them with something to do.

God doesn't detach himself from the people of Israel. They're not left in isolation. But they are left with a test through which they are to exercise faith.

What is faith? Well, similar to trusting in God. Faith, I'm sure you've heard it a thousand times. Forsaking all I trust him.

And that is what Joshua is saying to the people of Israel. Now you must forsake and trust. You must let go. No strings attached.

[17:19] You're at the bank. You must go forward. I wonder if some of us from a spiritual perspective are a bit like the Israelites tonight.

Perhaps some of us are pursuing an interest in the gospel. Perhaps some of us are asking soul searching questions.

Perhaps some of us are not far from the kingdom. And perhaps just like the kind of scenario we have here, there may be symbolic rivers or one particular river between you and the path of discipleship.

Well, I want to say to you tonight, that blessing follows obedience. What is it that might be hindering you from committing your life to Christ Jesus tonight?

Is there a symbolic river that appears to be so fast flowing that you recoil from it? You shy away from it, as perhaps some of the Israelites did, with fear and with trepidation.

[18:43] You know, it's like that when we're hiding our light under a bushel. There is this longing to come into the body of the kirk, but we're afraid.

Afraid of our own symbolic rivers. What will my friends say? Peer pressure. We all thought peer pressure related only to the school playground.

No, it does not. And then we might think, what will my immediate and extended family say? See, it's a personal thing, isn't it?

What will my work colleagues say? What of the implications? There is a price to pay. I recognize that there is much to sacrifice and put off and let go of.

You see, some of the Israelites would have been perhaps somewhat blinded to the blessings that lay beyond this threatening obstacle because they were so taken up with this river.

[19:54] Is that a picture of you tonight? So taken up with your symbolic river that you can't see beyond it.

Joshua's pointing them to the other side, to the blessings that they have all but inherited. But some of them can't even bring their eyes to look beyond this terrifying river that they are being asked to cross.

Might there be a symbolic river between you and the Lord Jesus Christ tonight? You're afraid of it.

You're afraid to wade through it. But again, remember, that blessing follows obedience. You know, somebody once said to me, in my pursuit of the Lord Jesus, I wanted to come into the fellowship of the church.

I did church on Sunday, but I wanted to be there on a Wednesday evening. And it wasn't until I took the plunge and waded through all of my symbolic rivers.

[21:22] It wasn't until I got there and birthed there that I understood the blessings of the gospel that I was now a recipient of.

You know, we can make such a big deal of these things. But this passage is for our encouragement to persevere, to persist.

And if we are trusting in God, God will open a way. If we take that first step, he will see to it that he will undertake for us.

He promises to direct our paths if we are prepared to acknowledge him in all of our ways. So what might be hindering some of us tonight from committing to Christ in a practical way?

Will you commit to come into the fellowship of the church over coming days in a way that you haven't previously, but you've been wanting to?

[22:26] It's been tugging at your heartstrings. But you've been shying away. Well, follow in the footsteps of the Israelites.

This passage is full of gospel, isn't it? The great gospel dynamic is here. You see, for Israel, God parts the waters.

When? When the priest's feet plunge into these waters. And the priests, they really do lead by example, don't they?

Their eyes are fixed on what lies ahead. They're not looking down. They are focused on the land of promise beyond the Jordan.

What does the letter of the Hebrew say? Fix your eyes upon Jesus without distraction, without deviating in any way.

[23:25] Look to Jesus. He is the author. He is the perfecter of our faith. Had they focused on the river itself, they would have been overwhelmed, weighed down with anxiety.

Instead, the priests concerned are looking forward. They're not downward looking. And there's a great lesson there for us.

We are to focus on him. And him alone. And not on the hurdle between us and him.

The moment the priests took that plunge, God met them. It's not as if he had left them.

He was with them every step of the way. Now we come to the heart of the matter. Why is the Ark of the Covenant mentioned here? Why is it a point of emphasis?

[24:34] Well, for good reason. The Ark of the Covenant they carry in the Lord's name. That which symbolizes the near presence and power and faithfulness of the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God of Israel.

it's a powerful symbol of his covenant faithfulness. God, the Lord, tabernacles amongst his people.

Yes, at one level, God firmly places a responsibility on the shoulders of his people to act. But he doesn't forsake them.

He doesn't leave them to their own devices. He is with them, enabling them here through this event to trust in him, to lean on him, to rely on him so that they can overcome whatever obstacle they face beyond the Jordan and they will.

What lies beyond the Jordan? the fortified walls of the great city of Jericho. Well, they will face many more obstacles and hurdles.

[25 : 56] But God is teaching his people here, enabling his own children to see that they can and will be, should they trust in him, be more than conquerors.

They are to exercise faith. You know, when you read Psalm 23, we'll sing it in a moment, but David the psalmist, it is as he walks through the valley of the shadow of death that he discovers in a particular way the shepherd's near presence.

How do we know that? We'll always make a distinction between how the psalm begins and the turning point you have in Psalm 23 with respect to the valley of the shadow of death.

Up to this point, David has been speaking about the shepherd in the valley in a very intimate, personal manner. He is speaking not about him, but directly to him.

It was John Knox who said that prayer is earnest and familiar talking with God. And that is what David is doing. The storms that the disciples faced on the Sea of Galilee.

[27 : 27] Each storm taught them to trust in Jesus Christ, the rock of their salvation. Indeed, you might argue that each storm was a means of bringing them even closer in their relationship to their Lord and Savior.

Now, notice the priests here. They remain in the midst of the Jordan with the ark until all the people had crossed over completely.

Again, the symbolic significance of this is powerful. The Lord's presence is known as they pass through. God meets them there.

You know, it's a bit like the footprints in the sand this particular moment in the history of Israel. You know how it goes. The pilgrim who's walking along the sands of time and his life, scenes from his life flash across the sky and he observes that there are two sets of footprints, one belonging to him, the other to the Lord, but there are times there are these perplexing times of trial and testing when he sees not two sets of footprints, but just one set.

At the lowest, saddest testing times of his life, and it bothersome, and he can't help himself, but he must ask, why only one set of footprints?

[29 : 16] I don't understand, you said you would never leave me, you would never forsake me, and how does the Lord respond, my precious child, I love you, and I said in my faithfulness that I would never leave you or forsake you during your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

So, the people of Israel, the priests, they carry the ark, but in a profound sense, it is the ark that carries them.

It is the God of covenant faithfulness, who ferries them through, underneath are his everlasting arms.

Yes, they carried the ark, but it carried them. God is with them, surrounding them with his near presence, leading them, shepherding them through this river of testing, and enabling them to triumph in his name.

God is the God of God. Well, by emphasizing the great gospel truth that he can do the same for you and I. So, what of your river tonight?

[30 : 50] What of this symbolic river that is such a burden and a hurdle and a hindrance that perhaps keeps you awake at night, robbing you of your sleep, weighing your shoulders down, so much so that you don't want to speak about it?

What is God saying to you tonight? Trust me, he's saying, your river, your symbolic river, rather than alienating you from God, can become a means of bringing you and I closer to the Lord.

You see, the Jordan only moments ago was overflowing its banks. now all Israel, we see, are crossing over on dry ground. You see, by God's grace, hurdles can be overcome, obstacles can be removed, potential problems become great opportunities through which we can discover the all sufficient grace of our God that enables us to press on and keep on keeping on.

And so, we are exhorted to do just that. The Israelites emerge triumphant.

They are victors. They have conquered the river. But like David, when he says in Psalm 18, by my God assisting me, I overleap a wall.

[32 : 26] and it's all for our encouragement. Would they not be conscious of the voice of God speaking to them as God spoke to his people through the prophet Isaiah?

The covenant God who says to his people tonight, to say to you in your own perplexing situation and your anxieties and worries and concerns when you pass through the waters.

Yes, when you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overflow. They shall not overwhelm you.

Fear not, for I am with you. And I will take you through every encounter. I will take you through the valleys. And ultimately, I will take you to Emmanuel's land.

Wonderful promises conveyed to us. So much so that we too can hear the voice of God saying to us, press on.

[33 : 54] Paul says to the church at Corinth, so we do not lose heart. God, for this slight momentary affliction, which it was for the people of Israel, is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

So it was and so it is for you, for Israel, as it is for you tonight. So what great lesson do we take? Well, the lesson that Paul is anxious to convey to the church at Corinth.

In light of this symbolic river, we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, as is this river, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

May God grant each and every one of us to triumph in his name, in all of our trials, and tribulations, and testings.

Amen. Let's bow our heads in prayer.