

Entering into God's promises

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Preacher: Malcolm Hazell

[0:00] The reading is Joshua chapter 3. Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan where they camped before crossing over.

After three days the officers went through the camp giving orders to the people. When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it.

Then you will know which way to go since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about 2,000 cubits between you and the ark. Do not go near it.

Joshua told the people, consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. Joshua said to the priests, take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people. So they took it up and went ahead of them. And the Lord said to Joshua, today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.

[1:16] Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant, when you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.

Joshua said to the Israelites, come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God. This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Gergashites, Amorites and Jebusites.

See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe.

And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.

So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest.

[2:33] Yet as soon as the priests who carry the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan.

While the water flowing down to the sea of the Arabah, that is the Dead Sea, was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

Amen. Amen. Thank you so much, Emmanuel and Georgie, for leading us in worship and Mark for bringing that reading. Well, God bless you all as we come and hear God's word to us.

Let's pray, shall we? Father, may it be that your word is a light to our path. May it be that your word brings light to our darkness.

[3:49] And may we be found as people of faith in our day. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, friends, you remember in our series so far that we have been seeing Joshua taking on the mantle of leadership for the people of Israel from that great leader, Moses.

He's been assured that all the promises given to Moses are now for him and for the people of Israel. It's been confirmed. And the beautiful promise that he received that God's presence would go with him.

How vital that was for him to know. We come to chapter three and we see them on the verge of the Jordan, about to go in. And I want you just to imagine in your mind's eye as you look out to see an

enormous river, probably 200 feet wide, between 10 and 12 feet deep in the deepest part. And then think of what this first task is for this great leader, Joshua, to take the people across that river. They, of course, are going to be going where God has asked them. They're going to cross the River Jordan. But how exactly do they do that? Well, they need to prepare. And verses one to five in our text shows us something of their preparation.

[5:13] So God readied his people in three ways. And the first way was he asked them to pause. We've had quite a lot of pausing, haven't we, over recent days.

They're paused and they're focused on the ark and they're asked to consecrate themselves. Now, I wonder what they'll do in this preparation time. I was wondering whether they might do some raft building or possibly some swimming lessons.

That would seem quite practical with a river in front of them. But none of this, of course, is part of God's preparation. You see, it's not so much about us preparing ourselves for a tough chance, a tough calling.

It's more about us preparing ourselves for what God is going to do. And that's what the people of Israel were realizing. They were preparing to see God's glory done in front of them and before them.

So the preparation involved a pause. It involved a pause about three quarters of a mile from the river. Now, if you've got that perspective, you can see the extent of the river.

[6:22] You can see what's happening. They had clear sight. And for three days, they watched that river in flood. At the end of three days, I suspect they were very clear.

It's impossible. It's utterly impossible. Three days of watching it swell and gush down to the dead sea.

That sounded ominous, didn't it? Three nights of listening to the torrent continuing all through those three days. After three days, I think Israel is absolutely clear.

They must have divine intervention. Unless God intervenes, it's utterly hopeless. Many of us, I guess, have been stuck, haven't we?

Waiting, hoping to move forwards. And just as we were making plans, the second wave comes of this pandemic. It's washed away some of our meagre hopes and plans.

[7:25] Brothers and sisters, we too must pause, look, listen. We too need divine intervention, do we not?

Another part of the preparation was to focus on God. This is seen in verse three. Joshua asks his people to look out for the ark of God. Now, it's not a particularly big thing, the ark of God.

It's about 1.3 metres long. So it does require careful sight to keep the ark in sight. In fact, in chapters three and four of Joshua, the ark is mentioned no less than 17 times.

Something is on the Lord's mind as he's revealed this to the writer of this book. 17 times the ark is mentioned. And inside that ark, of course, were the two tablets of stone which set out the Ten Commandments, which would be a massive blessing to the people of Israel and to the nations around to follow.

And may we as a nation not forget God's good commands for our blessing. Frankly, if you look at the river, the way ahead looks utterly impossible.

[8:40] But if you look at the ark and you see the maker of heaven and earth, then what was impossible is absolutely possible.

The maker of heaven and earth, a river? No problem. The final act of preparation, we're told, is that Israel is to consecrate themselves, verse 5.

And this involves washing themselves, washing their clothes and renewing their allegiance to Almighty God. To cross the river is going to require preparation.

Recognising the impossible predicament that they were in and that we are in. And refocusing on the Lord, consecrating ourselves to the Lord. Is that what he's saying to us at this time?

Be consecrated, people of God, to me. Secondly, we see this in verses 6 to 14. To cross the river is going to require obedience.

[9:41] Verse 6. The ark is carried ahead of the people. And then the priests obediently carry the ark down to the river, getting their feet wet in verse 8.

They were called to listen to God and to take the next step. They didn't know what was going to happen. They weren't told exactly how God would do this. But as they take that step, the miracle occurs.

The hand of God to us is similar. We're asked to take a step. It may seem a small step, an insignificant step. But nevertheless, a step. And as we take that step and the next step and the next step, the hand of God's purposes is revealed.

But it comes one finger at a time. This is the way in which God works. He sets out the overall direction of where we're going to go.

We all know we're going to a new heaven and a new earth. But the individual steps along the way, they're revealed one step at a time. And what God is looking for is a people who will obediently take those steps by faith and not by sight.

[10:49] We don't know how that step fits with all the purposes of God. Having said that, Joshua does rather kindly set out for the people, reminds the people in verse 10 that this step moving towards the Jordan is a part of a bigger step of what God giving them the land that was promised.

Isn't it true, though, for many of us that we say, give me Canaan, but without the Jordan? I want to have that glorious promise fulfilled, but I don't really like the challenges along the way.

I guess we all perhaps would say that from time to time. But this isn't God's way. I wonder what steps of obedience he's calling you and me to take just at the moment.

You see, as we take the step, however small we think it is or insignificant, it's as we do that, we are pushing the door of gospel opportunity, of God's purposes coming to pass in our day.

Finally, not only are they to prepare, not only are they to be obedient, they finally cross the river in the light of God's beautiful presence.

[11:59] This is in verses 14 to 6 to 18. I wonder, as you look out at our society today, as you look, you may see what you might consider our impossible rivers.

In our anti-God secular society, we seem to have a society in full flood against God's ways, and we may look at it and say, it's impossible.

But never forget that none of this is outside of God's powerful control. The next six months may look to us like an unrelenting torrent, cutting us off from where we want to be with no clear way through.

At times like this, we may be tempted to spend our entire time looking at ways, practical ways, to stop the river blocking our path. We can expend a lot of time in raft building, in bridge building, in swimming lessons, and it's all rather wasted.

And sadly, in doing those things, we lose sight of God himself. I'd like just to read that text that Mark read to us earlier, just verses 14 to 18.

[13:13] And as I read it, I want to ask you, where is the focus of this text? So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant went ahead of them.

Now the Jordan was in flood in this time of harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the Ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing.

It piled up in a heap a great distance away at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan. And while the water flowed down to the Sea of the Araba, that is the Dead Sea, was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

The priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground while all Israel passed by the Ark until the whole nation had completely crossed on dry ground.

Where's the focus of the text? Is it the river? Well, certainly we're given information about the river that it's in full flood. But as soon as that's mentioned, the river, frankly, disappears.

[14:20] It's just dry ground. So this great expanse of water just goes. Is it the people? There were hundreds of thousands of people going across this river.

So just imagine the expanse of water, the hundreds of thousands of people. But it seems to me that the focus of the text repeatedly, repeatedly comes back to the Ark of the Covenant, just 1.3 meters

long.

That's the focus of the text. We see it again and again. Let me just highlight as it comes up. In verse 14, the priest carried the Ark.

Verse 15, as soon as the priest carrying the Ark. Verse 17, the priest who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle and while all Israel passed by. Passed by what? Passed by the Ark. The spotlight in this text is continually and repeatedly on the Ark of the Covenant, indicating the beautiful presence of Almighty God amongst his people.

[15:28] This is something for us to notice. The rivers seem powerful and unrelenting. The people are numerous, but the focus is on a little box, 1.3 meters long.

A beautiful box, but probably quite difficult to see if you're one of those people. How do we cross the rivers that we face? Not, I would suggest, by looking at each other or looking for a great leader like Joshua.

However, the only way of passing through the impossible and impossible rivers is by the power of Almighty God and his glorious presence and by following his word, which was hidden, of course, in the Ark.

So let's stop looking at the water and the torrent of daily bad news, can I suggest to you? Let's stop listening to moans, focusing us back on the impossible river.

This is not good for our hearts, I don't think. Instead, let us be a people who prepare and consecrate ourselves for this uncharted journey ahead.

[16:40] Let us take small steps of obedience and focus on the light and power of God's presence among us. Let us read the tablets of stone that were in that Ark.

Let us read the Bible, its commandments, and trust that more than any recent research that may have come out. And brothers and sisters, can I remind you that we will stand on dry ground together and the Lord will be with us.

Let us pray for all those who have travelled together on this journey. May God bless us. I'm going to put a little question on the screen for you to think about just for about a minute.

So just ask the Lord to work by his spirit now as you consider this question. Thank you.