

Sunday 23rd July 2023 Entering the promised land

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Joshua 3v9-17, John 5v24 Crossing the Jordan

⁹ Joshua said to the Israelites, “Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God. ¹⁰ 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, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. ¹¹ See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. ¹² Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³ 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.”

¹⁴ So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. ¹⁵ Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

George Meegan is a British adventurer who took six years to walk 19000 miles from South America to the tip of North Alaska in the early 80s. He broke many world records, got married along the way, and is now a campaigner for equal opportunities for children around the world. Reflecting on his journey in the Irish independent newspaper he said this ‘I’ve met desperate people whose only horizons are prison walls... I hope my trip reminds them that freedom exists.’

The quest for freedom and fulfilment is an inherent part of our human nature and we’ve been following the story of the Israelites journey to the promised land, following their footsteps in the early books of the Bible from Genesis to Joshua.

Naomi Pendle shared last week how Moses appointed Joshua to succeed him as leader as he was one the few from his generation who didn’t grumble about the challenges ahead and had faith to believe that God would fulfil his promises. At the laying on of Moses’ hands, Joshua was filled with the Spirit of wisdom and

commissioned by God to be a strong and courageous. There is a pattern in the Bible that one generation makes plans, only for the next generation to fulfil them. We see that with Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, Jesus and his disciples, Paul and Timothy.

It's sobering to think that Moses never actually crossed into the promised land – he just looked over to Canaan from the top of Mount Nebo. But Moses learned that the journey is as important as the destination. He was known as one who met with God face to face, and his legacy was massive. He wrote the *Torah*, the first 5 books of the bible with clear instructions for the Hebrews to pursue their destiny as God's chosen people. Moses taught them that key to their identity was loving God with all their hearts, showing this through their obedience and holiness, and loving others with compassion and integrity. Moses laid the foundations for the entire Judaeo-Christian world-view but he could only glimpse with the eyes of faith God's bigger plans for the whole world, ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Christ. When his job was done, Moses had to hand over to another generation to actually cross the river Jordan.

So after nearly 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, God finally gave the green light for Joshua to lead the people into the promised land. And this is where we join the story today in chapter 3 of the book of Joshua.

Ray Stedman produced a wonderful introduction to this book. He wrote this: Joshua (whose name means "God is salvation") is packed with practical lessons -- challenging concepts to help us grasp the principles of a Spirit-led life. The key to the book is given to us in the New Testament: "these things...were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come." (1 Corinthians 10:11). What the people of Israel went through in their actual historical experiences become patterns, or metaphors that we can apply to the spiritual battles in the spiritual pilgrimage in which we are engaged. These experiences have an exact and accurate application to us.

Joshua is one of the two books of the Old Testament that every Christian should master. (He suggests that the other is the book of Daniel.) These messages are primarily designed to help Christians withstand the first full impact of the battle of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you feel the force of the opposing powers; if the tremendous, subtle deceptiveness of the principalities and powers against which we are engaged have come upon you so that you sense that you are in the conflict (Ephesians. 6:12), these books will be especially important to you.

The fact that Joshua follows the book of Deuteronomy is certainly in the wisdom and care of God. Deuteronomy prepares us for Joshua by introducing us to the great second law of the spiritual life -- "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans. 8:2) -- which will lead us into the experience of victory described in Joshua.

The Promised land is a picture of the Spirit-filled life -- the life that God intended for every Christian to live. The Spirit-filled life is not for advanced saints only, it is the prerogative of every follower of Jesus, by his grace.

The book of Joshua has three main sections. The first four chapters are concerned the entrance into the land and all that involves. If you are struggling right now with how to enter into a life of victory with Christ, how to move out of the wilderness of doubt, restless wanderings, and mere subsistence into the full blessing of the Spirit-led experience, then this is the section you ought to concentrate on -- Israel's entrance into the land -- out of the wilderness and into Canaan. Chapters 5 to 21 cover Israel's conquest of the land through many battles and conflicts as they take hold of the land of promise. The final 2 chapters, including some of the passages from Joshua's own lips, set out the perils and dangers in the land that we must guard against in order to remain in the place of victory that the land represents.

But today I want to focus on three particular actions from Joshua chapter 3 that I think the Lord wants us to consider today.

- 1) Looking for the presence
- 2) Choosing to remember
- 3) Stepping out in faith

Verse 10 and 11 says this: ¹⁰ *This is how you will know that the living God is among you ...* ¹¹ *See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you.*

During the 40 years in the wilderness, the people learned to worship wherever they stayed. They set up the tabernacle and central to that was the Holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant was put. Whenever you read about the ark of the covenant in the old testament, think God's *presence* and *promises*.

The design and contents of the ark all served as reminders of the presence of God, his promises and power.

Inside the ark were the stone tablets upon which the finger of God had written the Ten Commandments which were a sign to all Israel of God's desire for relationship.

There was also a pot of manna, a reminder of God's provision during the previous forty years (Ex.16:33, 34). And one other item was included: Aaron's staff--a dead stick that miraculously grew leaves and almonds to remind the people that God can bring life from death and can also choose leaders from whomever he wishes. Three historical reminders, three witnesses to God's promises and provision and power. If the contents of the ark speak of God's faithful presence, then the top of the ark speaks of God's manifest presence. On top of the Ark was a gold plate called the Mercy Seat over which two statues of cherubim knelt (Ex.25:18-19). Psalm 80:1 and 99:1 describe God as "enthroned upon the cherubim." God was made manifest above the Mercy Seat, judging Israel by his presence.

Romans 2v4 reminds us that it is the Kindness of God that leads to repentance. When we picture God's presence as powerful yet merciful, we are drawn to repentance and obedience. Not because we are compelled to but because we want to. The Israelites were not compelled to cross the Jordan, they looked to the presence of God to lead them into the new place.

When this Ark went out in front of the people, it meant God was going before them. It was God himself, who would go first into Canaan. Their task was to keep their eyes on the ark, follow it's lead, in other words to pursue God's presence and come after Him. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Second, v12 is all about *choosing to remember*.

This is a stone that I took from the Zambezi river when I went to Zambia on an Alpha mission trip in 2012. We had no money for the trip but somehow by prayer and faith, every penny came in and the Lord provided for us. This stone is testimony to that and I keep it to remind me that the Lord is faithful.

As Joshua prepared to cross the river Jordan he said in v12: 'Choose 12 men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe'.

It seems a bit random, but later in the chapter we learn that these 12 chosen men are to collect 12 stones from the river bed to set up as a monument to testify to the Lord's miraculous power for the coming generations.

I guess these days we might task someone to take a video as we go. Or write a book or diary of progress. Which is exactly what my predecessor did when All Saints church was extended here in 1892. Revd Edward Hardcastle wrote weekly newsletters over a 2 year period describing the progress being made with the work, and Tom Peryer collected them together and made a booklet called 'A Time to build up'. It is really fascinating to read of the ups and downs of their journey as we embark on our own Rock project soon. In July of 1892 Revd Hardcastle wrote 'The prolonged delay has been very trying to us all, and we can only take comfort in saying that as far as we are concerned it has been unavoidable'. As well as delays, they suffered financial challenges: 'Alas it is no use hiding from ourselves the fact that somehow or other we shall need nearly another £1000 before the work is finished.' But they pressed on in faith: 'If we now start the work from the very highest motive ie. of doing honour to God, we shall surely find that he will send all we need for completing the work.'

We are sat in a place that testifies to God's faithful providence, like the stones that were taken from the Jordan

Finally it was up to the priests to take the first step. Carrying the ark of the covenant, they had to step into the Jordan, at which point the miracle began.

The river was in flood. It seemed an insurmountable challenge. But as they stepped out in faith, the waters piled up upstream leaving them safe to proceed to the other side.

Jesus promised the disciples 'surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age'. So his presence, confirmed by the new covenant in his blood, is with us now, and the Holy Spirit is our guarantee of grace empowering us to take the next step.

If you are facing a seemingly insurmountable barrier in your life, take heart today. God is faithful to our single step taken forward in faith.

So to sum up today, a paraphrase of v10: 'This is how you will know that the Lord's presence with you, and will certainly give you salvation and victory. Keep looking at the promises of God and take a step forward. Your faith will be rewarded.'

Psalm 114:3-7: The sea looked and fled; the Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills, like lambs. Why was it, sea, that you fled? Jordan, that you turned back? Mountains, that you skipped like rams? Hills, like lambs? (Here's the answer) Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob.