

**“FORWARD BY FAITH”
Joshua 3:1-17**

**Mililani Community Church
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Introduction: The crossing of the Jordan River is an event that has captured the imagination of many hymn writers. One of those hymn writers was Samuel Stennett who wrote a hymn we have in our hymn-books: “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks.”

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye, To Canaan’s fair and happy land, Where my possessions lie. All o’er those wide extended plains shines one eternal day; There God the Son forever reigns and scatters night a way. No chilling winds nor pois’nous breath can reach that healthful shore; Sickness and sorrow, pain and death are felt and feared no more. When shall I reach that happy place and be forever blest? When shall I see my Father’s face and in his bosom rest? Chorus: I am bound for the Promised Land, I am bound for the Promised Land; O who will come and go with me? I am bound for the Promised Land.”

I like that hymn but I have problems with it theologically, because the writer of that hymn was wrong about the Promised Land. He pictures the Promised Land as foreshadowing heaven. But crossing Jordan is not a picture of death and Canaan is not a foreshadowing of heaven. Crossing the Jordan River and entering Canaan was a crisis in their lives that brought them into a new spiritual experience. It meant they were committed to a struggle against strong armies and fortified cities. It required a walk by faith and total commitment to God—rather than walking according to the flesh in unbelief and disobedience as they had for 40 years in the wilderness.

Outline:

This chapter is all about crossing the Jordan River:

The preparations for the crossing

The consecration for the crossing

The completion of the crossing

Crossing the Jordan River was a transition to a new level of spiritual experience. That is what it pictures for the believer today—a transition to a new level of spiritual experience. It means the end of life lived on the principle of human effort, and the beginning of a life of faith and obedience. The obstacle which became the way of transition into this new level of spiritual experience was the Jordan River. Someone has called it “the river of impossibility.” It was the last obstacle to shut Israel out of the Promised Land.

I think each of us needs to ask ourselves the question: **“Are there obstacles in my life that keep me from enjoying the life of obedience and victory?”** Many times there are obstacles in the lives of believers that keep them from moving forward in their Christian lives...“rivers of impossibility,” that keep us from moving to a new level of spiritual experience—from a life of defeat (walking in the flesh) to a life of victory (walking in the Spirit). Sometimes the obstacle is social pressure. Sometimes it’s a habit that grieves the Lord. Sometimes it’s unsaved friends who drag us down and influence us away from the Lord. And those obstacles may appear to be as formidable as the Jordan River at flood stage. But what I want us to see this morning in this story is the fact that **God is able to remove the obstacles, just as he did for Israel.**

PREPARATIONS FOR CROSSING (1-4)

After the spies had returned from Jericho with their favorable report, **v.1: “Joshua rose early in the morning, and he and all the sons of Israel set out from Shittim and came to the Jordan...”** It was a journey of about seven miles. It sounds simple: **“...and they lodged there before they crossed...”** But the Jordan River was at flood stage at that time of year because of the melting snows of Mount Hermon and the mountains of Lebanon (v.15). Instead of a quietly flowing river, it was a raging torrent of dark muddy water, overflowing its banks and about a mile wide. There were no bridges, no ferryboats or helicopters. And they had over two million people, including toddlers and infants as well as flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and supplies. How were they going to cross the river? It was a “river of impossibility!”

In the period of waiting at the Jordan, God gave the nation of Israel two specific instructions:

The First Instruction

“At the end of three days the officers went through the camp and commanded the people, ‘When 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, that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.’”

Up until then, the people of Israel had followed the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night as symbols of God’s leading, presence, and protection in the wilderness. Now those symbols were going to be replaced by the Ark of the Covenant. Notice Joshua and the officers did not say, “Follow us, men. We’re crossing the river.” This is not like a John Wayne movie.

The Ark of the Covenant is mentioned seventeen times in chapters 3 and 4. It symbolized the presence and power of God with his people. It was about 4 feet long, two and one half feet wide and two and a half feet high. It contained the Ten Commandments carved in stone that had been given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Also it contained a jar of manna to remind the people that day after day for forty years God had met their physical needs.

So the ark symbolized both the **covenant commitment** that God had made to Israel and the **covenant conditions** that God had established for the people of Israel. The lid of the ark was made of solid gold and called the “mercy seat.” The High Priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice there once a year on the Day of Atonement. The New Testament says that Christ is our mercy seat. At the cross of Christ sinful man meets a holy God and is reconciled to Him. We have broken God’s holy law, but through the death of Christ God extends his mercy and grace to us. How can a sinner have fellowship with a holy God? Only through the blood of Christ that was shed on the cross for our sins.

The Ark of the Covenant was to lead the march. “When you see it, move out.” It was the sign that God was leading them. They had the assurance of his guidance and leadership as they moved into the new, completely unfamiliar territory. If they didn’t follow the Lord, as symbolized by the ark, they would get lost and disoriented; they wouldn’t know where to go or how to live.

The Second Instruction

“Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come near it.” The instruction to keep a thousand yards away from the ark is fascinating. One reason for this command was to emphasize the holiness of God. But also from a logistical point of view—so they could see it and understand that God was leading them into the land.

“Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.” The Lord is saying, you are facing a new experience. You haven’t been this way before, but I am going to lead the way.

Application: I find this expression a very real encouragement at this stage in the life of the nation and in the lives of these people. They had never invaded a land before. They had never crossed a river at flood stage.

What do **YOU** do when you face new experiences? Panic? Or do you trust the God who says, I’m here! I’ll lead you. Keep your eyes on me!

Not on the circumstances. Not on the swirling current. On me! I know you haven’t passed this way before...This family problem. This illness. Whatever it is. “You have not been this way before.” But the encouraging thing for the believer is that the Lord is there. He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” The presence of the Ark was the guarantee of the presence of the LORD.

Today we don’t look for a visible symbol. But we look to the Word of God and the promises of God, in all these experiences, that God is with us. He will never leave us nor forsake us.

...So, those were the preparations. Now let’s look in verses 5ff, at...

THE CONSECRATION FOR THE CROSSING (5-13)

Verse 5: **“And Joshua said to the people, (polish your swords, put on your armor, get ready for battle...NO!!...) consecrate yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.”** Get spiritually prepared. Get your hearts ready for God’s blessing. This is not simply a military conflict; this is a Holy War. You need to be spiritually prepared and cleansed from sin. Joshua is saying here, we need to get things right...to confess our sins and be set apart from sin...because “tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among us.” And in preparation for that event we need a spiritual consecration.

Application: Today do we have a sense of expectation—as families, as a church, that God is really going to do something significant and great in and through us? If we do, then there are some spiritual requirements if we expect God to work in our lives and through us.

Colossians 3:9-10 speaks of the necessity of being cleansed from sin, putting away the old patterns of behavior and attitudes, allowing those things to be washed away by the blood of Christ. Then there is the wonderful invitation to put on the new person, to clothe ourselves in the righteousness of Jesus. That passage gives many practical examples of this in terms of compassion, kindness, humility, and agape love expressed toward those around us.

Whenever we face new opportunities, God's voice calls us to sanctify ourselves. God calls his people to holiness, purity of life, and separation from sin. Then God can use us. We need to be careful that as God's people we are set apart from anything that would hinder the blessing of God in our lives and in our church.

There were two purposes for this great miracle (5-8).

The First Purpose For This Miracle (7).

In the Exodus Moses led the nation through the Red Sea. That event was a miracle that God used to exalt Moses before the people. The people were able to realize that he really was the servant of the Lord, and they could trust his leadership and follow him. Exodus 14:30-31: ***"Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. And when Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses."***

Here God promised that he would do the same thing for Joshua, and in so doing he reminded the people that he was with Joshua just as he had been with Moses. Both Moses and Joshua received their authority from the Lord before the miracles occurred, but the miracles gave them stature, spiritual authority before the people. The miracles served as confirmation that God was at work in their lives.

The Second Purpose For This Miracle (8-13).

NOTICE, God told Joshua to tell the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant, "Go and stand in the river." In Exodus 14, forty years before when they crossed the Red Sea Moses had said in verse 13: ***"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."***

Moses said, ***"Don't be afraid. Stand firm..."*** The situation seemed humanly impossible, but God was saying to them: Calm down. Don't be afraid. Don't worry. Don't fret. Don't argue. Hold your place. Just stand still and SEE what I'm going to do.

At the Red Sea God performed a fantastic miracle and the nation crossed into the Sinai desert. And then those walls of water closed in and the armies of Pharaoh were drowned. FORTY YEARS LATER they are standing again, this time at a **river of impossibility**, and God says, "stand still in the river."

VERSE 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.”**”

This was the key to the victory they experienced when they went into the land. The living God was among them. Crossing the Jordan river was clear evidence of that.

That is also the key to victory in our lives: that God is with us! Even better than that, He indwells us by His Spirit as his children. That is the key to victory in the Christian life! The Lord of all the earth is leading the way. you don't need to be fearful!

Read verse 13. This was “mission impossible.”

Was the LORD able to remove the obstacle? Let's see in verses 14-17...

THE COMPLETION OF THE CROSSING (14-17)

(Note: Adam was a town about 15 miles upstream—so 15 miles of dry ground!)

How did that miracle happen?

Some say it didn't happen! This is just a fictional story. One writer says, “There is mythical coloring in what is said about the heaped-up waters of the Jordan.” How does he know? Was he there? This is a historical document that comes from those days. We base our views on this historical document. What do people like this base their views on? Imagination.

There are those who say this was a natural phenomenon. There was an earthquake that caused the crumbling of the cliffs that broke the flow of the water. That has actually happened in the recent past. In 1267 and again in 1927 there were earthquakes in the region and the Jordan River was blocked for 12 hours and 27 hours. But neither of those earthquakes came at flood stage! And how remarkable that it was **predicted** and then **happened** at precisely the moment the priest's feet touched the water's edge!

Now God could have done it that way. He MAY have used natural means to bring about this event. We really don't know how God did it. So I would rather say that **God performed a miracle in some way totally unknown to us.** By this historical event,

God was glorified. Because it was clearly a work of God.

Joshua was magnified and elevated in the sight of the people

The Israelites themselves were encouraged.

This was a sign that the living God was among them. And as they moved in to conquer the land, the Lord of all the earth would be with them!

But let's not stop there! This also applies to us...

APPLICATION: Isaiah 43:1-3: ***“But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. 3 For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”***

So this chapter ought to be a great encouragement to the people of God in every generation, including us today here at Mililani Community Church.

CONCLUSION: As I look out at you, I know that some of you have faced some “rivers of impossibility”—tremendous obstacles, and you have wondered, “How will we ever get through this?— or around this— or whatever.” But remember that God is faithful. The Lord of all the earth is with you. He is leading you. ***“When you pass through the waters, they shall not sweep over you because I have redeemed you, you are mine. I will be with you!”***

Lord, we claim this promise for ourselves today and for this coming year! Hebrews 13:8 says, “Be content with such things as you have, because He has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.’” May we remember this promise and cling to it and find you as good as your word.

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