

INTO THE PROMISED LAND

Joshua 3:1–4:9

Joshua chapters 3 and 4 mark a very exciting development in the history of God's Old Testament people. They are a record of the entry into the promised land.

There are clear parallels with the escape from Egypt which we read about in Exodus (chapters 13 and 14). On both occasions God used his appointed servants to lead the people: Moses to lead them out of Egypt, Joshua to lead them into Canaan. On both occasions God performed a similar miracle, parting the waters of the Red Sea (or the Reed Sea, to be more accurate), and parting the waters of the Jordan River. Both events happened at the same time of year.

These events were historical but Christians have always seen in them a wider significance. They are a picture of the Christian's experience. But how should we interpret them? For some the exodus represents conversion. The desert wanderings represent our time on earth and the promised land is heaven. Some of our hymns and spiritual songs picture death as crossing the Jordan into the promised land.

I don't think that is the right way of looking at it. God's purpose for Israel was twofold, to bring them out of Egypt and into the promised land. In Exodus chapter 3 verse 8 God said, 'I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land.' Out of slavery into liberty. The wanderings in the desert were not part of God's higher purpose. They were the result of sin and unbelief.

When we come to the New Testament we find one greater than Moses, greater than Joshua. We find Jesus, our deliverer and the captain of our salvation. He leads us out of slavery to sin and into the liberty of the children of God. If our Christian experience is more like struggling through the desert than entering the promised land then that is a sign of our disobedience, not God's higher purpose.

The entry into the promised land is a picture of our Christian experience now. In the waters of baptism we not only die to sin and the old life. We rise again to new life in Christ. In Colossians Paul says, 'You have put off the old humanity with its way of doing things and have put on the new humanity which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.' You have not just put off the old. You have put on the new.

Writing to the Corinthians Paul says, 'Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has gone' (2 Corinthians 5:17). But he doesn't stop there. He goes on, 'The new has come!' Talking about those wretched years in the desert he says, 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.'

Idolatry, gluttony, drunkenness, pagan revelry, sexual immorality, grumbling. That was why the people wandered so long in the desert, not because God wanted it.

So as we read about Joshua and the Israelites entering the promised land that's not a picture of our entry into heaven but our Christian life here on earth. It's a picture of victory, not a military victory but a moral victory, a spiritual victory, victory over temptation and sin, victory over anger and temper, victory over dishonesty and laziness, victory over bad thoughts, bad language, bad habits, bad relationships, victory over selfishness and pride.

The first lesson for us to learn is that before you can conquer you must enter. We have a saying, don't we, 'In it to win it'. You can't win it if you're not in it. Before you can conquer you must enter. And before you can enter you must cross over. For God's Old Testament people there was a river to cross and when they got to the edge it was clear that they couldn't do it.

There's a little note at Joshua 3 verse 15: 'Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest.' The young and fit might manage to scramble across but the elderly and the less fit would have no chance. However God had a different way, no struggling, no scrambling, no getting left behind. In verse 13 Joshua said, '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.'

The interesting thing about this miracle is that God used a natural phenomenon. In 1267 AD, and later as recently as 1906, a landslide dammed the river and stopped it flowing. On the 11th of July 1927 there was an earthquake which created a dam and the river stopped flowing for twenty one and a half hours. The miracle was in the timing of the event and the fact that it was accurately predicted in advance – the supernatural working through the natural.

I see a parallel here with the life of Jesus. It was a fully human life. He wasn't Superman. He was Jesus of Nazareth. Yet though he was never more than human he was never less than God, the supernatural working through the natural, the divine working through the human to bring us salvation. We are saved by trusting in Jesus. Our own efforts, our own sincerity, our own attempts to be good could never save us. 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast' (Ephesians 2:8).

Salvation is akin to coming out of Egypt, coming out of slavery to sin, coming out of guilt and condemnation. That takes a miracle and Jesus has provided that miracle through his death on the cross. Salvation also means entering into all that God has promised. Again, that takes a miracle and Jesus has provided that miracle through his resurrection and ascension into heaven. It is by faith that we enter into all that God has provided in Jesus. Have you put your trust in Jesus, to forgive your sins and give you new life, eternal life?

There are a number of features in this story of Joshua and the Israelites crossing the Jordan that stand out as significant.

1. The ark of the covenant

This isn't talking about a boat. It wasn't like Noah's ark. This ark was simply a box, 4 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet. It was made out of wood. It was overlaid with pure gold and had poles so that it could be carried without the box itself being touched. On the top of the box was a covering of pure gold in the shape of two winged figures facing each other. Inside the box the Ten Commandments were kept.

The importance of the ark can be gauged by the fact that it is mentioned 16 times in these two chapters. It symbolised the holiness of God: it was kept in the tabernacle, the place of worship. It symbolised the sovereignty of God: the top cover was a throne. It carried the law of God: it was a symbol of God's righteousness. When God specifically instructed, it was carried into battle: it symbolised the power of God. The lid was known as the Mercy Seat and the blood of atonement was sprinkled on it: it symbolised the forgiveness of God.

Verses 3 and 4 record the instructions which the people were given by their officers. 'When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, 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 a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it.'

The ark was a visible assurance of the leading of God. The people could follow with confidence. But they were not to be presumptuous. They were to keep a distance of about a thousand yards. In the same way we can know the leading of God in our

lives. We can have confidence in him but that confidence must always be tempered with reverence.

2. Communication

The officers spoke to the people. Joshua spoke to the people. Joshua spoke to the priests. The LORD spoke to Joshua with a word for the priests. Joshua spoke again to the Israelites, who in turn had to choose 12 men for a special task. Again, the LORD spoke to Joshua. Joshua spoke to the 12 men, and his instructions were that the Israelites were to speak to their children. It's all about communication.

Tell me the old, old story. Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in. Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon. Tell me the old, old story, tell me the old, old story, tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

3. Unity

It's there in the very first verse. 'Early in the morning Joshua and *all* the Israelites set out.' Look at the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4. 'The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while *all Israel* passed by until *the whole nation* had completed the crossing on dry ground. When *the whole nation* had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, "Choose *twelve* men from among the people, *one from each tribe*.' Unity.

4. Consecration

Chapter 3 verse 5: 'Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.'" Take that text to bed with you at night.

5. Remembrance

Twelve men were appointed, one from each tribe, and their task was to set up a memorial to remind the people what God had done for them. Chapter 4 verses 2 and 3. 'Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.'

In chapter 4 verse 8 we read that that's exactly what they did. 'They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down.'

God wanted them to have a visible, tangible reminder of the miracle. What better memorial than those twelve stones taken from right in the middle of the river bed.

In fact there were two memorials. Some scholars have been confused by verse 9 but what it actually says is, 'Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.' In verse 8 they took stones from the river bed to make a memorial on the other side. In verse 9 they set up a stone memorial in the river bed. The historian adds, 'And they are there to this day.' Not surprising really.

God has given us visible and tangible reminders of our salvation in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon.

6. Obedience

Chapter 4 and verse 8 is a summary of these two chapters. 'So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them.' Jesus said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments.'

I want you to think just for a moment what obedience meant to the Israelites. First the priests. The waters did not recede till their feet touched the river's edge. Then they had to stand in the middle with the ark until everyone had got to the other side.

Think about the people. There were so many of them, with so much baggage, and so far to cross. Finally they were all over.

Now think about the 12 men. Everyone was safely on the other side. The priests were safely on the other side. The ark of the covenant was safely on the other side. Now, Joshua said, you go back and get a huge stone each from the exact spot where the priests were standing. What must they have felt like having to go back, but they did. Then Joshua said, Now get a huge stone each and set up a memorial in the river where the priests stood. And they did.

And when everything that God had instructed had been done there was a huge noise and the waters came rushing back. What if... But that's what obedience is all about.