

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 20 June 1999

No. T0063

Speaker: Mr Peter Ollerhead

The Bible and Miracles: Joshua and crossing Jordan

Thirty years ago next month some words were spoken which will probably emerge as one of the most famous quotations to come out of the twentieth century. They were said by Neil Armstrong as he moved from the familiar environment of his space capsule onto the unknown territory of the moon. "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind".

To my mind, the Bible passage we have before us today in the book of Joshua, chapter 3, has a similar element of truth not only for the people of God in a past time, but also for us now. These Israelites were faced with a choice, either to stay where they were or to cross the river. To remain in a familiar yet harsh terrain or to advance into what they believed would become their homeland but not knowing what dangers might confront them.

For forty years they had been travelling through a wilderness, enduring many trials and privations. Now through Joshua's leadership the moment had arrived to make the decision to cross the river Jordan to enter their promised land. The night had been spent about a mile away from the swollen Jordan's banks. I am sure that the noise of the river in flood was carried through the night air to the camp of the Israelites. How many restless sleepers heard the sound of the rushing waters and lay wondering how they could possibly ford the raging torrent?

Joshua 3:10-11 tell us that the crossing of the river was to be the sign of their future success. "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you ... Behold, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan."

That God is amongst His people is a most wonderful fact. We often tend to view the Lord as being above the bright, blue sky, far removed from the cares and trials of His creation. Not so, says the Bible. That the presence of God was known by His people in Joshua's day is presented to us as an accomplished fact. It's certainly true today as many of you listening this morning can vouch. Another point that we need to note is that the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth was to precede the people. The Lord, as symbolised by the ark, would lead the people.

Before we expand that point, it will be instructive for us to consider for a moment the other titles given to the Ark in the book of Joshua. In verse 11, as we have heard, it is the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth. So God's jurisdiction is not limited by national boundaries. It is not we who give to God territorial rights but He, by His own sovereign majesty, is Lord of all the earth.

In Joshua 4:16, it is called the Ark of the Testimony. The ark contained the two pieces of stone on which were engraved the Ten Commandments. Thus there was a witness or testimony to God's righteousness and holiness. Thirdly it was called, 3:3 of the book of Joshua, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God. This was a reminder to the people that they were in a covenant relationship with the God of all the earth which allowed Joshua to make the seemingly audacious claim that the Lord was their God. There is a world of difference between the acknowledgement that God is supreme over all and accepting Him as our own, personal God, ever seeking, by grace, to do His will. So the host of people stood waiting for the command to move. The rising sun at their backs cast its rays across the river, highlighting the swift current that was taking the waters onwards to the sea of death.

As they waited, there appeared a small group of twelve men bearing aloft that precious load, the Ark of the Covenant. Onwards they trod until they reached the very brink of the Jordan. Now, as their feet stepped forth once more, the wondering people witnessed again the miracle of divine power. As the Red Sea had parted before their fathers many years before, so now the flooded river ceased to flow, leaving the priests to bear their burden across the river bed. This mighty demonstration of God's power in stopping the flow of the Jordan, taken with the equally miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, is used time and again in the Bible by poets and prophets to illustrate the presence of the living God amongst His people. Can I give an example of this by quoting Psalm 114:2, 3, and 7? "Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion. The sea saw it, and fled; Jordan was driven back ... Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob.

This surely is an encouragement for us all, for from this we learn that God goes before and assures us of His presence when He leads and guides.

Another lesson that this passage teaches is that the Lord is a God of miracles. For some listening this morning this might appear beyond acceptance. Our minds cannot grasp that God can show His power in supernatural ways. Yet is the possibility of the waters of the Jordan being stopped for a little while a greater exercise for the mind than the statement, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"?

I judge that both are evidence for a God who, thankfully, is involved in this world. Our Bible passage in the book of Joshua presents us with the very opposite of a God who is aloof in the vastness of eternity. It might be difficult to our modern materialist minds but we must remember that the Bible teaches that, "...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."

There I am quoting the letter to the Hebrews 11:6. We must be careful lest we try to fit the sovereign Ruler of the universe into the dimensions of our minds. If we do not believe in a God who reveals Himself and who acts in time and space we do not believe in the God of the Bible. Another important lesson which seems to be self evident here is that of obedience to God's commands. Joshua was convinced that the Lord was telling him to cross whilst the river was in flood.

The natural, rational plan would have been to have waited until the Jordan was its usual width, depth and tranquillity. Instead of waiting, Joshua obeyed the voice of the unseen God. He instructed the priests and they obeyed. Obedience to God's Will can sometimes be a most difficult thing. We can talk and discuss, plan and deliberate but plain simple obedience to what we know is God's Will can be difficult for us as oftentimes we are self-willed, opinionated people. Due to our selfishness, or lack of faith, we often miss God's best. To seek further truth from our Bible passage in Joshua chapter three we must look deeper into its spiritual meaning. We often consider the crossing of the Jordan to be symbolic of death. Indeed some of our hymn writers use it in this way. Many of us must have heard the Welsh crowd singing "Bread of Heaven" as they gathered in Cardiff Arms Park to watch their national team play Rugby football. The last verse of this hymn contains these lines,

*"When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Bear me through the swelling current,
Land me safe on Canaan's side".*

We can never tire of returning to this great victory of the Saviour. When He rose from among the dead He destroyed him that had the power of death. No wonder we sing,

*"Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
Endless is the victory, Thou o'er death has won".*

His victory is our victory. All that has just been stated is wonderfully true. A better interpretation, however, for us today is to consider the stopping of the Jordan's flow by the presence of the ark of the covenant and the people crossing in safety to be indicative of the death of Christ. In its practical effects, that death enables a Christian to pass from one level of living to another.

Perhaps I ought to explain the analogy between crossing the Jordan and the death of the Lord Jesus at greater length. Any student of Scripture is aware of the importance of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. In our chapter this morning there are ten references to it. In the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews, and in the land of Canaan, the ark was at the centre of their activities. It is surely not stretching Scripture if we transfer this thought to the New Testament. Now it is a person, Jesus of Nazareth, who carries the testimony of God. Now it is He who is at the centre of the people of God. So we can regard the Ark of the Covenant as a picture of the Lord Jesus and the river as a picture of His death.

However, before we consider the implications of the death of the Lord for practical living I want to consider another aspect of His death. This is suggested by our passage, if we agree that the presence of the ark in the midst of the Jordan can correspond to the death of the Lord. Joshua 3:4 states that there remained a distance between the people and the ark of the covenant of about two thousand cubits or in modern measurements about a thousand yards.

There is in the death of the Lord Jesus that which man cannot draw near to in thought or experience. We celebrate with gladness and joy the fact of the Lord's death. That He died is one of the foundational truths of Christianity. Yet we must never assume that we fully understand it. We can meditate with wonder at the awesome display of love that was manifest at Calvary, and I trust we do, but we can never grasp its fullness. We will never know what it meant for God's Son to be made sin. He suffered alone. "There is a green hill far away" might be a children's hymn but when Mrs. Alexander wrote it she placed within it a verse which contains a crucial truth.

*“There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in”.*

None other, only He. Only the Son of Man who came seeking to save that which was lost. Like the Ark of the Covenant in the midst of the river, the Lord Jesus could not be accompanied in His suffering for sin at Calvary by any created being. There always remained a distance.

Let us turn now to see what our Scripture has to teach us about every day Christian living. I hope to show that it suggests the end of self life and the beginning of the Christ life. Or to quote a preacher of a previous generation, “...the end of a life lived on the principle of effort and the beginning of a life lived on the principle of faith and obedience.”

Joshua 3:3 tells us that, “...when ye see the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.”

These words are reminiscent of the Lord's call to His disciples. The simple truth is that if we wish to progress in spiritual experience we must follow the Lord Jesus. To quote the Gospels yet again, this time from Luke chapter 14 and verse 27, “... and whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”

Now by virtue of our union with the Lord Jesus we have passed through death onto resurrection ground. John 14:20 speaks of our union with the Lord Jesus; “At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.”

The apostle Paul in Colossians 3:3 writes, “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” This truth of our union with Christ ought to have a profound effect on our lives. We are united to Christ in glory by the Holy Spirit sent to us in consequence of His victory at Calvary. I state again, His victory is our victory. The Bible account of the crossing of the Jordan brings into clear focus the New Testament truth of spiritual life in the heavenlies. Just as the Israelites crossed over and began to enjoy the fruits of Canaan, so we through the work of the Lord Jesus can enjoy the spiritual blessings which are outlined for us in such letters as that to the Ephesians in the New Testament.

This is not to imply that all our blessings are conditional. Our position in Christ is all brought about through the grace of God. We as believers were marked out for blessing before the foundation of the world. Nevertheless there is a life of discipleship and blessing which God wills for His children if only they will heed His call. It must be remembered that God's purposes for the Israelites did not include wandering for forty years in the wilderness. They had been to the border of the Promised Land once before but through faint heartedness and unbelief they had turned away.

Now the Israelites were ready to move away from their wanderings in the wilderness to new experiences of the power of God as they crossed the Jordan to conquer the Promised Land. In the same way, we as the followers of the Lord Jesus leave behind the old life of self and sinfulness to walk in newness of life to Him. As we have already quoted, we have died and our life is hid with Christ in God. Are we, as Christian believers, seeking today to live the new life given to us in Christ? As Paul wrote in Romans 6:11, “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

This truth will help us to thwart the tempter and the temptations of the world for this is where our battle lies. The Lord Jesus for His disciples in John 17:16 and 18 tells us that we are in the world but not of it.

We have through His death been placed in another realm; the world with all its allurements should hold no fascination for us. How much do the siren calls of fame and fortune still affect us? Or the world's comforts and luxuries? The call of the Lord is to enter into our spiritual blessings and not get caught up in the rat-race of materialism.

This involves spiritual warfare and struggle as Paul reminded the church in Ephesians 6:12, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”.

Let us not then, ignore the call or turn aside but rather seek to enter into our inheritance as children of faith for He is faithful to keep His promises.

Be assured that God will be with us as He leads and directs our lives if we are His children. The prophet promised God's presence to His people as we can read for ourselves in Isaiah 43:2, “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.”

I believe that that promise is true today for those who believe that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God. Some time ago I was watching some children attempting to fly kites and after several unsuccessful efforts, one of them managed to get his kite off the ground. Now as the wind acted on the face of the kite and the boy stood his ground and gradually released more string, the kite began to overcome the force of gravity rising ever higher. May we, as anchored to the rock of Him who went through death, defy the powers that would seek to overcome our witness, testimony and walk with God. May we through the power of the Holy Spirit demonstrate the power of the God of miracles, the power of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the day in which we live as Joshua did in his!

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.