

CROSSING THE JORDAN

JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

by Doug Goins

The word transition is central to our study of this passage in Joshua. The dictionary defines transition as a passing from one condition or place or activity to another. None of us like change or transition with its fear of the unknown, the uncertainty of entering uncharted territory.

Last week I saw an ad in the newspaper for a seminar for women in career transition. Two of my four children are in their teenage years, going through that long, ambiguous, open-ended process of moving from childhood into adulthood. It's different for every teenager, but what they have in common is a fragile, changing identity. Our teenagers walk through fear and apprehension about the future.

I'm going through my own mid-life transition physically at fifty-one (I guess it's mid-life if I live to be 102). In the last year I've had to deal with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and some colon problems. Praise God, all of those problems have been resolved with the assistance of great doctors and my making some changes in my life. But I still seem to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking and talking about health. I and several of my friends who are over fifty remember how we used to make fun of all the old people who did that, and now we're doing the same thing.

The elements of fear of the unknown and potential disaster in these kinds of transition times in life would have been very familiar to the people of Israel standing at the Jordan River. Remember, these people had been waiting for three days for the command to move (see Discovery Paper 4458). Chapter 3 verse 4 implies their apprehension about what lay before them when Joshua says, "...You have not passed this way before."

Now in verses 7-17, at the end of this three-day waiting period, Joshua will give the people and priests instructions directly from the Lord. God will restate his promise to be with his people and give them the land. Then we'll see the twelve Levites pick up the ark and carry it down into the Jordan, and stand still in the middle of the river on dry ground where the waters have stopped upstream, and drained away below them downstream. And the people of Israel, having sanctified themselves for this crossing over, will follow the priests into the river. Remember, they're not to get too close to the ark. And while the priests hold the ark high in the middle of the Jordan, the Israelites will cross over into Canaan.

Israel's forty years in the wilderness was difficult, and the new generation of Jews anticipated the entrance in the land of promise. But, crossing over into a new life would be difficult. The transition from the wilderness into Canaan would not be an easy one.

In our text God lovingly calls Israel to be a cross-over people. I want us to work through the text, focusing on the significance for Israel in their historical setting. Then I want us to think through the implications of being cross-over people for us as followers of Jesus, as part of his church.

In verses 7-8, God makes Joshua a wonderful promise that he will exalt him:

And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. And you shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.' "

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. Thus 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. And we as believers have a right to expect that our leaders, in whatever arena, exhibit the power of God and the presence of God at work in them and through them.

Now Joshua speaks to the people. He doesn't exalt himself-his total focus is on what God promised. Verses 9-13:

And Joshua said to the people of Israel, "Come hither, and hear the words of the LORD your God." And Joshua said, "Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is to pass over before you into the Jordan. Now therefore take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man. And when the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be stopped from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap."

Put yourself in the place of the priests. The first word they heard was, "Walk into the river." Then they heard Joshua tell the people, "You follow the priests into the river and watch them standing in the water." This was a raging river, so the suspense was building. Joshua, who probably wrote the majority of this book, really was a great storyteller. Only at the end of his instructions did he reveal how God was going to do this.

Joshua instructed the priests and the people what to do, fundamentally giving the command of the Lord. He didn't have to pump himself up or build up his leadership in the eyes of the people, because he was convinced that God would do that. So he glorified God instead and focused on God's powerful, gracious blessings that they could expect to come. True spiritual leadership focuses the eyes of God's people on the Lord and his greatness.

Most of what Joshua said in these brief instructions came from two places: the last words Moses said when he installed Joshua as his successor in Deuteronomy 31, and the words God said to Joshua in Joshua 1. Joshua was not an innovator, bringing a new word from the Lord, nor did he give the people a religious pep talk to get them aroused emotionally to follow him and the priests. He just reminded the people of the promises of God, and he encouraged them to trust and obey.

Joshua did introduce a new aspect of God's identity. He was more than just "the LORD your God," his wonderful, intimate name for Israel. In verse 10 Joshua introduced God as "the living God," and in verses 11 and 13 as "the Lord of all the earth." Because he was the living God, he could defeat the dead idols of the seven pagan nations listed in verse 10, the inhabitants of the land that had been promised to Israel. And because he was the Lord of all the earth, he could go wherever he wanted and do whatever he pleased with the forces of nature. God had promised the people at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:5, "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine...." The psalmist reflects that in Psalm 97:5:

**"The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the LORD,
At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth."**

He was the Lord of the impassable river confronting the people of Israel.

So Joshua explained to the people what God was going to do. As soon as the priests walked into the river

carrying the ark of the covenant, they were to follow the priests. Remember, he told them in verse 3, "Keep your eyes fixed on the ark. Follow the ark." He also ordered each tribe to appoint one man for a responsibility that will become clear when we look at chapter 4 (to take stones out of the river to use as memorial stones). God was going before his people in the presence of the ark, and he would open the way.

In reviewing verses 7-13, I was struck that God gave Joshua and the priests and the people only as much information as they needed to accomplish what he wanted them to do. God always gives us enough information, and we can trust him with the knowledge that is communicated to us. Whenever he asks us to trust him and cross over into new areas of conquest, adventure, and discovery, as I've said more than once in this series, in God's commandments are his enablements. He will fulfill in us what he asks us to do.

The counsel of King Jehoshaphat, who was one of the godly kings of Judah many years later, echoes this wonderful truth: "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the LORD your God, and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed" (2 Chronicles 20:20). Solomon also said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise...." (1 Kings 8:56).

Now in the last paragraph, we see how God fulfills his good promise and honors the prophetic ministry of Joshua (Joshua was foretelling the future by faith). Verses 14-17:

So, when the people set out from their tents, to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap far off, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were wholly cut off; and the people passed over opposite Jericho. And while all Israel were passing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

Although the Jordan River was only about a hundred feet wide most of the year, during the spring flood season it overflowed its banks and became up to a mile wide. But as soon as the Levites carrying the ark put their feet into the water, the river immediately stopped flowing and stood up like a wall about twenty miles upstream near the city of Adam. This was a miracle of God in response to the faith of the people.

They were called to put their feet one in front of the other in following the Lord. Remember, in Joshua 1:3 God had said, "Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses." He was saying, "It's already yours, now just walk into it." Unless we're willing to step out by faith and get our feet wet, we're not likely to make much progress in these cross-over times of following the Lord. So as the priests followed in obedience, step after step, the river waters disappeared and they were walking on dry ground. And they stood in the middle of the river and waited for all the people to pass by. Can you imagine some of the comments those two million Israelites would have made as they walked across that river?

"This is not a very safe place."

"I feel a little exposed."

"I don't feel very secure doing this."

"It's what God said to do, so I guess we'd better keep walking."

The word "nation" in verse 17 is a significant word that describes the unity of the twelve tribes. It speaks of a community that is united. These people didn't cross over as isolated individuals. They were together trusting the Lord in the presence of the ark of the covenant.

Exodus 14 and 15 make clear that when God opened the Red Sea, he used a strong wind that blew the entire night before. This was not an accident-this wind was "the blast of [God's] nostrils." On the day of crossing over the Red Sea, when Moses lifted up his staff, the wind began to blow again. And when he lowered his

staff, the waters flowed back and drowned the Egyptian army.

But when Israel crossed the Jordan River, it was not the obedient arm of a leader that brought about the miracle, but the obedient feet of the people. Again, unless we're willing to step out by faith and obey his word, God can never open the way for us. The prophet Isaiah expresses this confidence in God, reflecting back on how God opened the Red Sea and the Jordan River, and he speaks of our confidence in that (43:1-3):

**"But now thus says the LORD,
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.

**When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.**

**...For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.' "**

As I have suggested several times in this series, Israel's crossing of the Red Sea pictures the believer's being delivered from the bondage of sin, and Israel's crossing of the Jordan River pictures the believer's claiming the inheritance in Jesus Christ. Joshua is a type of Jesus Christ, our Conqueror who leads us from day to day into the inheritance he has planned for us. Psalm 47, a messianic enthronement psalm, exults in Christ the King, "He chooses our inheritance for us...." The apostle Paul rejoices in this same divine planning on our behalf:

**""Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,
And which have not entered the heart of man,
All that God has prepared for those who love Him.'**

**For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even
the depths of God." (1 Corinthians 2:9-10.)**

It is one thing to say we believe this great theology of God's sovereignty, power, presence, and miracle-working abilities. It is another to live it out. The verb "pass over" or "cross over" is very significant in this particular story. It is used twenty-one different times to tell the story of crossing the Jordan River, of which seven appear in chapter 3. Repetition is always important in Old Testament narrative, but here it is especially important. This verb emphasizes the decisive nature of this moment in the history of the Hebrew people. It distinguishes this moment from everything that has gone before. (Two totally different words are used to describe Israel's crossing of the Red Sea.)

The land that they were passing into, Canaan, represented the struggle of faith, the reality of spiritual warfare as well as the promise of victory. It wasn't heaven on earth. Nor is the future that we walk into, each of us individually as the people of God. I want to spend some time in conclusion reflecting on our identity as followers of Jesus, as cross-over people.

As I already said at the beginning, change and transition are universal in our personal experience. The question this narrative raises for us is this: Do we trust the Lord to take us through the cross-over experiences we face?

Again, most of us have had long wilderness experiences to which we have become accustomed. There are moments for us when we stand shuddering at the edge of the Jordan, knowing that before us are rushing waters, a fortress city like Jericho, chariots of iron, perhaps giants in the land.

Most of us tend to be conservative by nature. I was thinking about our study of Rahab and the incredible natural openness that marked her life (see Discovery Paper 4457). Perhaps the nature of her business caused her to take risks. But most of us don't tend to be risk-takers; we are comfortable people who enjoy cushioned

pews and predictability in serving the Lord. But, this story promises us that the Lord will be with us, as He was with Joshua and the nation of Israel, through even the most difficult experiences of entering uncharted territory.

This week I remembered a boyhood crisis of faith, something that happened when I was a sixth-grader living in a little country town in Indiana. There was a boy I played with who came to our church, even though his family didn't come. His name was Jackie Gray, and one morning they found Jackie Gray hanging in his father's chicken coop. He had committed suicide because he lived in a violent, abusive family situation. I remember how my brother Mike and I struggled to put that reality together with the good God we were trying to learn how to follow and love. For both Mike and me it was a real crisis of faith. You may have memories of your own childhood that you can recall as a significant, difficult, painful cross-over time.

Adolescence has many transition issues, questions my own children are wrestling with. They anticipate leaving our family, experiencing the college campus, and making life-determining decisions about career and spouse.

I faced an overwhelming cross-over experience in divorce. I have good friends who have gone through financial failure. Fear of the unknown is a reality in both family and financial crises.

At this moment I have several dear friends who are struggling with debilitating physical suffering. One young woman in our church who has painful back problems has had two surgeries that haven't fixed it. I know the uncertainty of the future she is facing: What are the implications for her marriage? Will she be able to conceive and bear children? And if she does, what about her physical ability to care for those children? It affects her as she thinks about her career long-term; she loves what she does and is very good at it. Another, older friend is struggling with terminal cancer right now. Illness for both of these people is frightening but the truth of this passage stands for them. God promised, "I will be with you." (vs. 7), and Joshua promised, ".....the living God is among you, and He shall drive them out from before you...." (vs. 10)

For my friend facing terminal cancer, death itself is the final cross-over moment. The apostle Paul called it the last great enemy. But the reality is that Christ has promised us that he has taken the sting out of death. That victory is his. Christ walks through even that Jordan with each of us.

Remember, as we stand at the bank of the Jordan River, as we are confronted and challenged with what is frightening but also thrilling in terms of opportunity, we'll discover that these cross-over times, even though they're fraught with tremendous potential difficulty, only give God greater opportunity to demonstrate his power, his care, his concern, and his activity in our lives. That was the confidence that Paul showed in Philippians 1:12-26. Here was a great apostle who loved to minister, who loved freedom and travel, who didn't like the limitation of the chains of prison. But he was able to see through that. He talked about how the church was being unified because of his imprisonment, about how the praetorian guard was coming to faith because of his limitation. Then he said this: "For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (1:19-21.)

Martin Luther in his hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* struggled against "the flood of mortal ills," against "this world, with devils filled," but was still confident that Jesus Christ would prevail. That's the confidence that we take into whatever cross-over experiences we are confronted with as God's people. We follow the living God, the God of the whole earth, who knows each of us intimately.

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