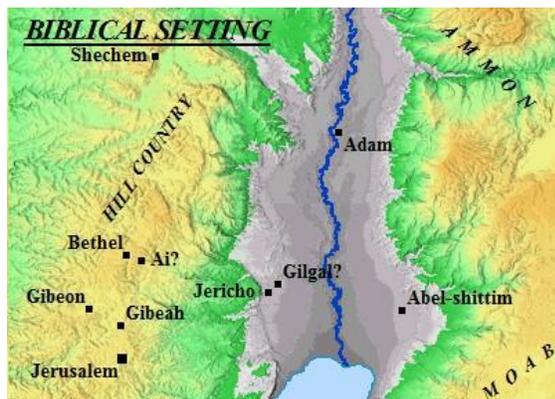


Promises, Promises: The Journey Home *When God Asks You To Do Something Scary*

Last week we considered the remarkable story of Rahab. It was a study in GRACE. Today, we are going to journey with Israel across the Jordan River as they enter the Promised Land. This is a study in FAITH.

The book of Joshua is all about faith. It is the story of God's people who begin to enjoy the blessings of the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They will possess the land God had already given to them.

Turn in your Bible to the book of Joshua, chapter three. **Joshua 3:1**



The people move out of their encampment and approach the Jordan River. The time of year is in the March-April timeframe. During most of the year, the river is perhaps 100 feet across. But now it is in the flood stage; the estimated width is a mile!

Can you imagine what the people might have been feeling as they came within sight of this racing river? This was a scary situation. God was asking the people to do a scary thing – cross the River and enter the Land.

This generation was facing a new scenario. They had a new leader; they had a new task before them. How would they respond? The response that God required was a response of faith.

I want to borrow the three points that Warren Wiersbe has for this chapter in his commentary on the book of Joshua. The first is the Word of Faith.

I. The Word of Faith

Let's pick up the story in Joshua 3, beginning with verse two: **Joshua 3:2-13**

Here's the thing: the people were to gain confidence through God's Word. God was saying to Israel: "Listen, I am with you. Not only am I with you, but I will go before you."

The people were being asked and encouraged to trust in God because of his promise to them. It didn't matter how scary the situation looked in their sight; God was asking them to look beyond what they could physically see. They needed to see with eyes of faith.

Someone has said, "Eyes that look are common; eyes that see are rare." God wanted his people to see, not just look. The eyes needed were eyes of faith.

Unbelief says, "Let's stay here – here where it's safe, here where it's known, it's familiar." Faith says, "Let's go forward; let's move ahead even if it is scary."

But God didn't ask them to move forward alone. Joshua tells them that they will see the ark of the covenant out in front of them. The ark was the symbol of God's presence.



While at Mount Sinai, Moses was given instructions to have skilled workers build the tent of tabernacle. In the inner most part of the structure was the Most Holy Place – the Holy of Holies. Housed within was this box overlaid with gold. Inside the ark were three things: the tablets of the Law, Aaron's rod that had budded, and a jar of manna.

On top of the ark was the mercy seat. It was here that the High Priest would sprinkle the blood of the unblemished lamb once a year on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur. So not only is the ark the symbol of God's presence; it is also a symbol of God's mercy.

Joshua instructs the priests to bring the ark of the covenant from the tent of meeting up before the people. In a sense, God came out of the tent.

But this was not to be taken lightly. Notice that Joshua instructs the people to keep their distance from the ark. They were to get no closer than 2,000 cubits – a little over half a mile. This is yet another illustration of God's holiness and the separation required between him and the people.

Holiness is an important concept in the Bible. The book of Leviticus is all about holiness, a call to Israel to be holy just as their God was holy. The idea was they should be set apart, separate from all that was unclean and common – from whatever might contaminate their relationship with the one true God.

Then Joshua told the people to "consecrate" themselves. The Hebrew word is related to the words "to sanctify," "holy" and "sacred." Robert Hubbard says, "The requirement for ritual purity signals that this river crossing is a solemn religious ritual, not an ordinary military invasion."

Before we move on I want you to see a very telling thing about the character of Joshua. Look again at verse 7: "The LORD said to Joshua, 'Today 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.'"

But when Joshua addresses the people (verse 10) he doesn't pull this out to build himself up as their leader. He doesn't mention himself at all! Rather, he speaks of the living God who will go before the people.

I think this tells us a lot about him. He had God's Word to him personally which had to have given him confidence in moving forward. Now, he exhorts the people with that same promise of God's presence that would instill confidence in the people obeying God's Word.

II. The Walk of Faith

First of all, faith was required of the priests. Notice that the river would be stopped up after they stepped into the water. Faith requires action. It's not one or the other; it's both. Faith steps out in obedience to God's command through Joshua.

The priests could have stood all day waiting for the water to recede but nothing would have happened. They could have had all the positive thoughts possible; they could have waited and waited, but nothing would have happened. It was only as they "walked in faith" that God acted in power.

God backs up the Jordan River all the way to the city of Adam. Look at our map again.



God gives the nation of Israel a 15-20 mile gap through which to cross. And did you notice this description in verse 17: "Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground."

God's miracle, wrought by God's power, was complete. It wasn't halfway done. The people didn't slog their way across with mud up to their knees.

What was the effect of this walk of faith? They gained courage through God's power. This will be so crucial for the task before them – to subdue the enemy and possess the land.

Can you get a sense of how this mirrors the other great water adventure in their nation's life? Over forty years before, the Israelites bounded out of Egypt following the devastating plagues that God brought upon that nation.

How thrilled they were to be free from bondage and on their way to the Promised Land. Then they came up to the bank of the Red Sea – the Gulf of Aqaba. Looking back they could see the pursuing Egyptian army – and they were scared spitless. Listen to the words of Moses to the people: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today." – *Exodus 14:13*

Now here is Joshua, standing before the overflowing Jordan River, and he declares: "Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you...." And he instructs the priests to walk into the river.

When the people have crossed over, the river closes over and flows downstream. And – don't miss this – cuts off any route back to where they had come from. The river was behind them, the enemy was in front of them.

But they had seen God's power and that gave them courage. And courage is what they will need as they prepare to experience what God had promised centuries before.

III. The Witness of Faith

When they have passed through the waters, Joshua gives further instructions to the people: **Joshua 4:1-5**

These stones were not intended for an altar of sacrifice, but a pile of remembrance. One of the repetitive phrases throughout the Old Testament to the nation of Israel is this: "Do not forget; remember. Do not forget; remember."

They needed to remember not only the Word of the Lord and not only the power of the Lord, but also the faithfulness of the Lord. His promise was to watch over Israel, to go before them. He was demonstrating his faithfulness in their lives. This faithfulness would give them the conviction they needed to press ahead, to possess the land.

This pile of stones, intended as a remembrance, would be a three-fold witness:

- 1) To the generation entering the land – **Joshua 4:6a**. The people would remember this pile of stones and strengthen their conviction that their God was with them, that he was on their side and would be their defender.
- 2) To the generation to come – **Joshua 4:6b-7, 21-23**. This echoes the many times that Moses exhorted the people to be diligent to tell their children the stories of God's faithfulness to the nation. Here is a physical thing to which they could point by way of illustrating that assurance.
- 3) To the nations of the earth – **Joshua 4:24**. This great event had exactly that impact. Look at the first verse of chapter five: **Joshua 5:1**.

Now, what can we learn this morning from Israel's experience? Let's begin with the same scenario posed at the beginning of our study: When God asks you to do something scary. Much of life's circumstances could be described that way, couldn't they? They involve the realm of the unknown, the uncertain, the scary.

May I suggest what is required of us is exactly what was required of the Israelites: faith or another word would be "trust." Look at the three points we considered before and see if the shoe of application doesn't fit.

I. The Word of Faith

God has spoken to us through his Word – a word full of commands and promises. The Christian's corollary to the Promised Land is not heaven; it is our salvation. We are to enter in and possess the salvation God has graciously provided through his Son, Jesus.

We are not only to enter the land (our salvation); we are to settle in and possess the land. The confidence we have is gained through God's Word.

Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, put it this way:

Faith is nothing but believing what God promises or says. Whatever remarkable thing we read of happening in the Old or New Testament, we read that it was done by faith – not by works, not by a general faith, but by faith directed to the matter at hand.

Israel found confidence in moving ahead because of the promise of God's presence. He assured them that he was with them and that he would go before them. The same promise is yet given to the New Testament believer. The writer of Hebrews says of God: "He will never leave you not forsake you."

The promise is made even more sure because God's presence is not symbolized in a gold-encased box. It is because his presence is in human flesh. When we, by God's grace, come to a saving relationship through Christ, God sends his Holy Spirit to indwell us.

The presence of God is no longer external; it is internal. We are no longer told to stay a distance away from God's presence. Through the Holy Spirit, we are invited into the very presence of God. Listen to the words of Hebrews, chapter four:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. – *Hebrews 4:16*

If or when you are facing something scary, you do not face that situation alone. God has promised you his presence, his enablement. Will you trust him; will you place your faith in his promise and move forward?

Unbelief says, "I'll stay put; this is safe; this is familiar; this is known." But faith says, "God is with me; I will go ahead."

II. The Walk of Faith

God says to us, "Put your foot in the water." Faith doesn't just say, "I believe." It acts upon what it knows. And as we move forward, we see God's power at work in our lives.

Turn over to the New Testament book of Ephesians. Twice Paul prays for these believers that they might know the power of God working in them.

Ephesians 1:18-20; Ephesians 3:14-21

When we see God's power at work in us, we gain courage to face the future. Why did the young shepherd boy David have the courage to confront the giant Goliath who was taunting the army of Israel? It was because he was building upon his prior experiences of seeing God's power at work for him.

I don't know all the situations you are faced with this morning, but they include going on in life without loved ones; they include financial stress through job layoffs; they include struggling with health issues. There are stresses and fractures that threaten to pull families apart. These are all scary things in life.

Where do we find the courage to face them with confidence and hope? Through a walk of faith, grounded in God's Word and in his power.

I don't mean to minimize at all the severity or the scariness of what you might be facing. Red McDaniel, Jim's father-in-law, was one of the most tortured POW's in the Vietnam War. He spent six years in captivity.

Long ago, I had him speak at an outreach breakfast in the Pentagon. He made a statement I have never forgotten. Reflecting on his time in captivity and all he experienced, he said this: "Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the presence of faith."

God told Joshua and Israel: "Be strong and courageous." He says to you and to me today, "Be strong and courageous."

III. The Witness of Faith

We, like Israel, must not forget from whence we have come. Faith involves remembering. When we remember, it builds our convictions as we move forward.

Someone wrote: "An opinion is an idea that we pick up and carry around with us. In contrast, a conviction is something that picks up us and carries us around."

As we face the scary things of life, our convictions gained through God's faithfulness will bear us along. Remember what God has done in your life. Regularly rehearse in your mind the amazing grace you have experienced: your sins forgiven, your possession of eternal life, all the promises God has made to you – the promise of his presence, the promise of his joy, the promise of his peace, and so on.

Those are things that help prepare us for life's situations, especially those that seem to overwhelm us. Listen, the greatest risk, the greatest danger, the greatest issue of life has already been settled – your eternal destiny. Surely the God who has secured your eternal salvation is able to guard and keep what is his.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians these words of encouragement:

For I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. – *Philippians 1:6*

We must remember. Two suggestions for us to remember:

1) Of significance and most importance to the Christian is the atoning death of Christ. Each month we celebrate communion or the Lord's Table. This is like a pile of stones; it's a remembrance of what God has done for us through Christ. It is the supreme demonstration of God's love and mercy towards us. We remember; this is the Christian's counterpart to the Red Sea/Jordan River crossings.

We have crossed over into the Promised Land of our salvation; now possess the land and enjoy what God has provided for us.

2) Rehearsing our own story: how did you come to Christ? What difference has Christ made in your life? Where have you seen God work? Where do you see him working in your life? Pile up some stones of remembrance in your mind and heart.

I want to close and leave you with a thought today. It has all to do with the exercise of faith when we face difficult situations. It comes from the book of Daniel, chapter eleven, verse 32: "... the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action."

Do you know him? That's the message of part of a famous sermon by Dr. S.M. Lockridge .

Video Clip – *That's My King*

Do you know him? Those who know their God shall stand firm and take action.