

Nothing Is Impassable with God!

Joshua 3

I have come to the conclusion after watching the recent Vancouver Olympic Games that many winter athletes are absolutely crazy, especially those who fly on skis. It was interesting for me to listen to the commentaries that were shared about what is going on in the mind of ski jumpers before they jump. When the athletes come to the bottom of the hill, their minds scream for them to move their bodies in the exact opposite direction that they need to move for a smooth and safe flight. The ski jumpers' minds protest, "Don't lean forward, you will hurt yourself."

When I think of what goes on in the minds of ski jumpers, I think of Israel's priests on the edge of the Jordan River. Their natural thought would be, "We can't step into that river. It's impossible for us to cross." However, their instruction from the LORD is, "Go and stand in the river." They are asked to do the exact opposite of what they would naturally think to do in their situation.

In our technological age, we don't think that crossing a river, even a raging one, is that big of a deal. We would simply fly across, boat across, or build a bridge across it. Not only did Israel not have any of these options available, but also the Jordan River is at flood stage. Israel is told to cross the river at the time when Barley is harvested. This would have been in Nissan, the first month of the Israelite year, the spring of the year (our March or April). The Jordan is no dried up creek bed, but a raging river. The Hebrew name for Jordan means "The Descender." The river drops 1,000 feet from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. When the Jordan is at flood stage in the spring of the year, it flows at nearly 10 miles per hour and at a width of more than a football field. The situation ahead of Israel looks impossible. How will they respond?

As we study the account of Israel's crossing of the Jordan River, let's put ourselves in Israel's shoes. Let's try to feel what they must have felt. Let's try to relate their response to our own in the same kind of situations and learn from their example.

Joshua is a man of faith who puts his faith in God into action. Having received the positive report from the two spies he sent out, Joshua wastes no time. He and all Israel set out from Shittim and travel to the Jordan. They have yet to receive word as to how this massive group of people will be able to cross the river. However, believing that God will make it possible, they move close to the Jordan.

The Israelites camp at the edge of the Jordan for three days before they are given any orders or instructions. During this time, they have ample opportunity to see what they are up against. They have a lot of time to assess the humanly impassable hurdle ahead of them. After three days, the officers of Israel give orders to the people.

The officer's message to the people—prepare to follow the ark of the covenant (3:1-4)

To experience God's blessing, His people must follow His leading and submit to His instructions

The advance party for the Israelites isn't reconnaissance troops, but priests carrying the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was a small box, probably about 45 inches long, and 27 inches wide and high that was overlaid with gold inside and out. The cover of the ark had a golden cherub on each end facing toward the middle. The priests were to carry the ark of the covenant ahead of the people and when they did, the people were to take their positions and follow it.

What is the significance of the ark of the covenant? Why is it so prominent, being mentioned numerous times in Israel's crossing of the Jordan? The ark represented the promises of God. It contained the tables of stone on which God had written the law—a reminder of God's covenant with Israel. The ark represented the presence of God. The ark was the throne of God—the place where His glory rested in the tabernacle. The ark's movement ahead of Israel symbolized God's sovereign leadership of the coming invasion of Canaan.

God will show His people the way down paths not yet traveled. God assures His people then when they follow the ark of the covenant, they will know which way to go in a place where they have never been before.

God will lead His people where they need to go, their concern needs to be submission to His instructions. Israel is told to keep a distance of a thousand yards between them and the ark. Biblical history tells us that if Israel doesn't do things God's way, if they don't keep their distance, they will be consumed. Why is it important for the people to stay over a half mile away from the ark? I think of two possibilities. Being this far from the people, the largest possible number would be able to see the ark and be reminded God was leading them over this unfamiliar territory. Also, this distance would remind the people to treat God with reverence and respect as opposed to being casual and careless. Yes, God is our faithful companion as we travel down life's road. However, we dare not treat Him casually as our buddy. We best treat Him with respect and do things His way.

Joshua's message to the people—consecrate yourselves (3:5)

To experience the amazing things God does, His people must be spiritually prepared

Knowing Joshua's previous battle experience and God's promise to give Israel victory over her Canaanite enemies, we might have expected Israel to have been told to prepare militarily, to sharpen their swords, but instead, they are instructed to prepare spiritually.

The people are to consecrate or set themselves apart in preparation for the amazing things the LORD is about to do among them—feats that only God can do. If the experience of Israel at

Mount Sinai was the pattern, “consecrate yourselves” meant that everyone bathed and changed their clothes and that married couples devoted themselves wholly to the LORD. A holy God, whose holy presence is about to be manifested among His people in the amazing things He will do on their behalf, requires a holy, set apart people.

Joshua’s message to the priests—lead the way (3:6)

That Israel’s crossing of the river is not an ordinary military invasion is further demonstrated by the fact that priests and not warriors are the ones who are instructed to lead the way. God’s chosen spiritual leaders for Israel are to lead the way and God’s people are to follow. Ultimately, of course, it is the LORD’s leadership that Israel follows. We know from Numbers 10:35 that the taking up of the ark by the priests was tantamount to the LORD’s own arising.

God’s message to Joshua—Joshua is given a promise and a command for the priests (3:7-8)

The promise to Joshua-I will exalt you and demonstrate my presence with you

God promises Joshua that the great miracle He is about to perform will exalt him as the leader of Israel—it will serve to establish Joshua’s credentials as God’s representative to lead Israel. The basis of Joshua’s being exalted won’t be his doing, but will be the demonstration of God being present with him just as He was with Moses through the miraculous cutting off of the Jordan River.

The command for the priests-Go and stand in the river

The vague instruction that Joshua is to pass on to the priests anticipates the miraculous work of God. How can the priests stand in the waters of the Jordan when the river is at flood stage? When water speeds are at just 8 mph, slower than the Jordan at flood stage, it exerts a force of 264 pounds per square foot, enough force to sweep a car off the road. Just the same, the priests are told to go and stand in the Jordan River. Again, in proceeding forward in accordance with God’s plan, it is the spiritual leaders who are held responsible to lead the people by taking the first step of faith.

Joshua’s message to the people—Joshua shares God’s Words, telling the people what to expect (3:9-13)

Gene Getz in his commentary on Joshua presents the following scenario to help us feel what Joshua must have felt:

“Imagine that your family is in desperate trouble. You are facing financial obstacles so gigantic there is no way you are going to survive economically. You may lose your home, your business, and your reputation. In fact, you are in such deep trouble that your greatest fear is that you might lose your family.

And then... God speaks to you directly—in an audible voice! He tells you that He is going to exalt you in the presence of your whole family. He is going to work a great miracle—and you will be the one to lead your family out of the deep crisis. God next reveals that as a result of delivering your family, everyone who sees the miracle happen will consider you a great hero.

God then says that you are to tell your family what He has just revealed to you. How would you react?

Now, multiply this fantasy a thousand times, substituting the name “Joshua” for yours and think in terms of “your family” being all the children of Israel. However, don’t consider it a fantasy, but reality.”

Joshua demonstrates courageous faith. He trusts God to do what He said He would do so much that he announces what will happen without first seeing it happen.

For the first time, Joshua speaks to the people as the LORD’s mouthpiece just as Moses had done. He refers to God as the living God. In contrast to the dead idols worshiped by pagans who were unable to act and unable to save, the living God was among the Israelites. God’s people would know the living God was among them and that He would certainly drive out the pagans living in Canaan based on the miracle He is about to perform.

The ark of the covenant of the LORD of all the earth would go into the Jordan ahead of Israel. Again, the title given to the LORD is significant here. He is the LORD of all the earth. He is the world’s one and only Sovereign. He owns everything and has the authority to distribute the land of Canaan as He pleases. He has the authority and power to stop the flow of the Jordan River to make it possible for His people to get across. And that is just what God promises to do. As soon as the priests carrying the ark of the LORD set foot into the Jordan, its waters will be cut off and stand in a heap.

In verse 12, Joshua instructs the people to choose twelve representatives, one from each tribe of Israel. These men were chosen for a special task, but that task isn’t revealed until the next chapter. This is a common literary device in the book of Joshua. A future event is anticipated and is developed later in the book.

We have considered what Joshua did say to the people, but I think it is also important to observe at this point what Joshua did not say. Joshua doesn’t disclose the special promise that he would be exalted by this miraculous event. He keeps the focus on God and what He is going to do and humbly avoids saying that which would bring attention to himself. In this way, Joshua is an example of humility for all of us.

The walk of faith—God’s people cross the Jordan River on dry ground! (3:14-17)

God’s people trust God and follow their leaders

The last time Israel was on the doorstep of the Promised Land, the people did not trust God to do as He promised and rebelled against the leaders God had put in place. This time, Israelites follow their leaders. They break camp to cross the Jordan following the lead of the priests who carry the ark of the covenant ahead of them. They have made a definite transition from walking according to the flesh as they had in the wilderness to walking by faith in the living God.

Natural conditions are against them

The waters of the Jordan are at flood stage and a miracle is needed for the people to cross. This is a major test of faith. Will the Israelites hesitate in fear and murmur or will they trust God to do as He promised and advance in faith?

The priests trust God and step into the raging waters

The priests, the spiritual leaders of Israel take the first step of faith. Leaders, God has for us to take the first step as well. God expects us to take the lead in trusting Him to help us move forward. May the mental picture of the priests taking the first step into the raging waters of the Jordan serve as a reminder of the important responsibility we have been given to lead the way in taking steps of faith.

God cuts off the flood waters, causing the Jordan to stand up in a heap

This miracle is an incredible display of God’s power. As we all know, water is a powerful force. When we hear the words “Katrina” or “Tsunami” today, we all get a quick mental picture as to how powerful of a force water is. Not only did God cut off the waters of the Jordan river, but He also had the waters pile up in a heap a great distance away—all the way back to the town of Adam. There are different estimates as to how far away this city was. I found estimates as low as 16 and as high as 30 miles away. It really doesn’t make much difference which estimate is closer. Miles of water piled up in a heap is an incredible display of God’s almighty power.

The priests stand firm in the midst of the river while the people pass on dry ground

I so appreciate how the details recorded in Joshua 3 silence the liberals and skeptics of our day who try to explain away the miraculous events of scripture. For example, they support the conclusion that the events of Joshua 3 are the result of a natural phenomena. They cite the following events as their evidence: On December 8 of 1267 and on July 11 of 1927 earthquakes occurred that dammed up the Jordan River for several hours. They claim that Joshua 3 is not a record of a miracle, but of a natural occurrence like these earthquakes. This explanation is unacceptable for a number of reasons:

1. The event came as predicted at the exact timing it was predicted—when the priests set foot in the Jordan.
2. The river was at flood stage whereas the earthquakes that affected the flow of the Jordan were not during flood season.
3. The wall of water was held up until all of the people including the priests had crossed. The water returned immediately after everyone was across the river.
4. The riverbed was dry ground.

If this cutting off of the Jordan were a natural event that God used to get his people across, the riverbed would have been wet and muddy, not dry. God didn't just stop the flooding, uncrossable river. He dried up the mud that would have bogged down the people along the way.

Considering all of the factors involved, it is clear that the cutting off of the Jordan was a special act of God, a supernatural act brought about in a way that man doesn't know or understand and that man cannot duplicate. This was a miracle of God.

This was a miracle that glorified God, exalted Joshua as Israel's leader, assured Israel of God's presence among them, and terrorized the Canaanites.

Application for our lives today:

When the LORD does magnificent things through us, let's humbly magnify Him, not ourselves.

Follow God's lead focused on Him, not on the "raging rivers" of life

The ark of the covenant is a prominent part of this account. The ark is mentioned numerous times, not because a piece of furniture is significant in itself, but because of what it represents—the presence of the LORD leading Israel. Israel was ultimately to follow God's lead. As they did, they were to keep their focus on Him and His ability to get them across the river. We need to do the same. Focus on His person—He is the living God. He is the LORD of all the earth. Focus on His presence—He is present among us and promises never to leave us or forsake us.

Focus on His promises—He told Joshua what would happen and everything He promised came to fruition. We can trust God to do the same in fulfillment of the promises He has given to us.

Focus on His power. He made the mighty river Jordan at flood stage stand up in a heap and made it possible for His people to walk on dry ground. No river is impassable with God.

Remember that God's hasn't changed, He is still able to do mighty works among His people today

May God work among us as He did in Israel, doing such amazing and wonderful things that the only explanation that can be offered is that "God did it!"

Let's trust God to lead us into new and unfamiliar territory

Entering new and unfamiliar territory can be intimidating. We wish it would get easier to trust God. However, it never seems to get easier. Each new crisis or challenge is different. Each new path is foreign to us. When we are uprooted from what is familiar, we do not need to fear. We can trust God to lead us to where we need to go.

Let's trust God to make a way for us to move forward in accordance with His will when there doesn't appear to be a way!

There are so many situations in life where the next step God is leading us to take looks like an impassable raging river. Our natural mind screams, "Don't take the next step." We are scared to move forward. Why? We get the impression based on what we can see that there will be negative consequences if we do. Just the same, God directs us through His Word to trust Him and take the next step He is leading us to take even though moving forward is a frightening proposition and seems impossible. Will we trust Him with the impossible as Israel did or will we retreat in fear? Nothing is impassable or should we say impossible with God!

I'm reminded of the words of the song written by Don Moen:

"God will make a way,
Where there seems to be no way
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me
He will be my guide
Hold me closely to His side
With love and strength for each new day
He will make a way, He will make a way."