

Joshua 3:16

Joshua 3:9-17

Slide 1

Joshua 3:13, *“And 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.”*

He was one of four. Slowly he walked along; his pace governed by the other three.

His feet moved as if they were on auto pilot and his eyes remained fixed on the river in the distance.

The dark brown waters swirled angrily as they raced toward the waiting sea. The harvest floods had caused the river to overflow its banks, and the water had a cold and dangerous look about it.

Still he walked; his eyes never leaving the raging torrents ahead. He would never question his commander verbally, but his mind was filled with whys and how's.

He wished that he could just stop and think it over, but it was apparent that was no longer an option. Besides, if he did stop what would the others think? What would his family think?

Everybody knew what an honor it had been to be chosen. Actually, it seemed like a pretty dubious honor to him. Yet, still he walked.

Maybe it was all a joke, after all the boss couldn't seriously expect them to just walk into the river; he didn't even know how to swim.

We are in week three of our 3:16 series. This week we're moving to the Old Testament.

We're going to look at a story about the people of Israel as they prepared to claim the Promise Land that was promised to them by God over forty years before.

Most of us probably know the broad strokes of the story, if not from the Bible, then from Hollywood. There was "Exodus: Gods and Kings," before that Disney gave us "The Prince of Egypt."

In 1995 Ben Kingsley starred in the made for TV movie "Moses" and the most famous one of all would be "The Ten Commandments," made in 1956 with Charlton Heston.

Even if none of them got it right, they did lay the foundation for the story of the Exodus.

400 years after Joseph's extended family settled in Egypt at the invitation of Pharaoh, the tide of popular opinion turned against their descendants, and the people of Israel were enslaved.

Then God called a man named Moses who confronted the Pharaoh and said, "*Let my people go.*" You've seen the movie or read the Bible, so you know the story.

Plagues, Release, Red Sea, Pillar of Fire by Night, Column of Smoke by Day, Mount Sinai, Golden Calf, Ten Commandments, Mana and quail, Water from rocks, and lots of grumbling.

After they arrived at the Promised Land, the naysayers had their way and the people spent another 40 years wandering in the desert before they're finally prepared to enter into the land that was promised them.

A new leader, a man named Joshua, was about to lead them into the Promised Land. The only barrier that stood in their way was the River Jordan.

It's here in chapter 3, verse 16 that we read: *"The water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho."*

Like all the 3:16s, Joshua 3:16 doesn't and can't stand by itself, it's only a part of the story. A story that began forty years before.

Slide 2

When he and Caleb brought back the report of Canaan forty years before, Joshua felt the excitement of victory course though his veins only to have it shattered by the disbelief of his people.

Forty years previous, the people of Israel stood ready to enter the Promised Land.

But when Joshua and Caleb cast the vision of what God had for them on the other side of the Jordan the people braced their feet and refused to go.

That's probably a bit of an understatement, since Numbers 14:10 tells us, *"But the whole assembly talked about stoning them."* That was not a resounding endorsement of their leadership.

This time it was Joshua, not Moses who sent out the spies. When they brought back a favorable report, he gathered all his people around him for a gigantic pep rally.

He tells them to purify themselves, which simply meant that they were to surrender their wills to God, and with that command comes the promise.

Joshua 3:5, *"Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."*

Four long decades after their initial refusal, God has finally given Joshua and Israel the green light, and this time as the vision is cast the people's response is quite different.

God's not only promising the Israelites *"Purify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do great wonders among you;"* the reverse is there as well, if not stated at least implied, *"do not purify yourselves and the Lord will not do great wonders among you."*

We only need to read the Old Testament to realize that God kept His promise because there's no other people in the world who have seen the hand of God in their history like the Jews.

If you had talked to the average Israelite at this point, they probably would've told you it was time for a rest, time to kick back and enjoy life for a while.

After all they had spent 40 years wandering through the wilderness; 40 years of eating manna. Nobody wanted them for neighbors, they were *"Those people"* so it was forty years of desert skirmishes.

The River Jordan now stands between them and the Promised Land. But this wouldn't be the only barrier they'd face. In the next three thousand years the Israelites would have their work cut out for them.

Hebrews 11:1 tells us, *"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."*

It was this type of faith that led the children of Israel into the promised land; a land only seen in its possibilities by Joshua and Caleb.

It was the vision of these two men that kept the promise alive year after year. It was faith that allowed the children of Israel to claim Canaan.

Slide 3

As long as their faith was alive, they were blessed. When their faith became little so did their blessings.

This is spelled out plainly in Hebrews 11:6, *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

The author didn't write, *“It's hard to please God without faith”* he wrote *“without faith it's impossible to please God.”* The Israelites' ticket into the Promised Land was the ticket of faith.

In Joshua three, we read the instructions that God gave to Joshua. How the priests had to carry the Ark of the Covenant down to the river Jordan which was overflowing its banks with the Spring thaw.

In verse thirteen we read, *“And 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.”*

Now, God could've led the Israelites to a shallow spot, or He could've instructed them to build a raft.

God could've divided the Jordan before the Israelites got there, but the fact of the matter was -- this incident had to happen for two reasons.

The first was to test their faith. They had to answer the question: *“Do we really believe that this is the direction that God wants us to go and do we really believe that He can provide the way?”*

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, *“Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.”* In this case, faith was taking the first step, even while the river was still raging.

The second reason was even more important. When the twelve tribes of Israel followed the priests and the Ark of the Covenant to the edge of the Jordan, where they stood with their hearts in their throats waiting for the priests to step into the muddy swirling water, they were proving their willingness to obey God, no matter what.

Had the Israelites stopped at that point; if they had devised some other scheme to cross the Jordan, I'm convinced that we'd view Israel today as just another ancient, dead civilization.

Slide 4

So, once again we see that God never entrusts us with a lot until He tests us with a little. Let's go back to Joshua 3:16.

"The water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho."

Sometimes we're led to believe that all we need is a vision and faith, then everything will be all right.

But in the case of the people of Israel, there was a raging river standing between them and what God had for them.

So, it came down to the faith of the priest in the lead, if he had stopped everybody would've stopped. The destiny of a nation rested in the hands of one man.

So, the question is, *"What did he know?"* Why was he willing to step into a raging river? Maybe you're wondering, *"So what? What does crossing a river 3000 years ago have to do with me today?"*

Well, the reality is if we're following God, there'll be times as individuals and as a church that we'll find rivers of doubt, controversy and conflict that'll need to be crossed.

But, the question remains, "*What did the priest know?*" Well, first, he knew the provisions of the past. For forty years the people of Israel had wandered in the wilderness.

Never settling, never establishing a country, always at odds with the environment and their neighbors, and during that 40 years he saw God's hand at work over and over again.

In a wilderness so inhospitable that no crops would grow, he saw God provide them with food for forty years. Wandering in a land without rivers and lakes for forty years, they didn't go without water.

The man in the lead had seen it all, he had tasted the manna, feasted on quail, and drank water that miraculously sprang from rocks.

He had seen God's hand as the Israelites defended their families against hostile forces.

As a child, he had witnessed the entire country escape from Egypt; he had walked on the floor of the Red Sea and followed a pillar of fire at night and a column of smoke by day.

So, he believed that if God was faithful then, God would be faithful now. As a church, when we face obstacles we only have to look to the past to see how God has provided over and over again.

Slide 5

But he didn't just know about the past, he knew the promise of the future. For forty years, Joshua and Caleb probably talked about what was on the other side of the river.

For forty years, he dreamed of the day that he would have land of his own, for forty years he dreamed of a land that flowed with milk and honey.

He knew that their destiny wasn't the wilderness but the Promised Land. There were those who would've settled for a life in the desert, but he knew that God's promises were greater than the wilderness.

There were those who would claim that the vision was Joshua's but this man knew that it was God's vision and Joshua was simply the messenger.

He knew that Joshua had seen the Promised Land; that Joshua had tasted the fruit of the Promised Land, and that no one had sacrificed more for the vision than Joshua.

What is it that God wants you to do with your life? There are times in our lives when we get distracted from the vision.

What is your vision for your career? For your children? For your education? For your spiritual life? Are you being true to the vision?

Sometimes it's easy to settle for less than what God wants for us, to settle into complacency in the wilderness and miss the Promised Land that God has for us.

But that's to settle for less than God's best, and God's best might just be across the river.

We need to ask what God wants us to do. Those who carried the Ark believed in Joshua and in the vision; they weren't going to let a river stand in their way.

This means that we won't always look like other churches, and we won't always do things like other churches.

So what this means for Grace Fellowship is that sometimes we'll have to cross rivers to get to where God's leading us.

Slide 6

Conclusion

Ultimately Joshua knew his faith would be honored. Faith requires that we believe. You can't demonstrate faith without belief, and you can't demonstrate belief without action.

It wasn't enough for that first priest in the group to proclaim: "*I believe that God can stop the river so we can cross,*" unless he was willing to take that first step and actually step into the river.

Any time God calls us to do something He first calls us to believe, and then He calls us to step out in faith.

What is it that God's whispering in your ear today? What vision does He have for you for tomorrow? What river is God calling you to cross? Only you can answer that and only you can take that first step.