**GOD ENABLES THE ISRAELITES TO CROSS THE JORDAN**

August 18, 2019

Joshua 3:1-17

Key Verse 3:17 “The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.”

In the last chapter we learned Rahab’s faith. She had faith that the Lord God is the true God. Her faith was based on God’s work and history happening in her own generation. She said, “I know that the Lord has given this land to you and a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan” (2:10). Rahab’s words planted faith in the hearts of the Israelites that God went ahead of them into the promised land and they could conquer the land. Rahab became the great grandmother of King David. She was listed in the genealogy of Christ! It is amazing that a Gentile prostitute was included in the genealogy of Jesus. But to God, faith matters most.

In today’s passage we learn how God enabled the people of Israel to cross the Jordan after hearing the report of the spies. Crossing the Jordan River was a key event in Israel’s history. Just as crossing the Red Sea changed Israel’s standing from slavery to freedom, passing through the Jordan into the Promised Land transformed Israel from a wandering people into an established nation. To the people, the river seemed like an insurmountable obstacle. But to God, it represented a decisive turning point. Likewise in our lives we encounter rivers and obstacles that block our progress for doing what God wants us to do. Many times we come to that obstacles and we stop. We don’t know what else to do when the obstacles are too great: the river is too wide and it runs too fast. We begin to calculate and we fear the obstacles themselves. We all want to be great before God. We all want God to do great things through us. But the obstacles of past rejection, or past failures, or fear of failure, or fear of commitment, or just plain laziness have been put in front of us and we are paralyzed. As we look at how Joshua instructed the Israelites, according to God’s command, we can learn how to overcome those obstacles in our lives. Then we can pass from one level of Christian life to the next level by experiencing God’s mighty power.

**First**, General Joshua prepares to cross the Jordan River. The spies had returned from Jericho and given a favorable report. Joshua orders the Israelites to move to the edge of the Jordan River and wait for further instructions. Those three days of waiting at the Jordan river were days of preparation for crossing it. As they waited they no doubt became increasingly aware that crossing the Jordan River was impossible. The Jordan River was only about 100 feet wide most of the year, but during the spring flood stage, which it was now, it became up to a mile wide. As they faced the difficulties, there had to be many conflicting proposals being offered. Some of them no doubt were saying, “Let’s go back!” Some no doubt examined the various ways of crossing the river. They could not swim across. They could not build enough boats to transport over a million people. They did not have time to build a bridge. They had to wait patiently. As we know well, waiting on God is very difficult. It requires faith.

When it was time to go, Joshua gave three instructions. Look at verses 3-4. “…giving orders to the people: ‘When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.” Joshua’s first instruction was that they are to follow the priests. They are to follow the priests because they have not traveled this way before. Note that the priests have not traveled that way either. Joshua trusts so much in God’s protection and promise that he knows that God will lead in the best way. Joshua simply tells the people, “When God tells the priest and move--you move and let God handle the rest.” And that is exactly what we need to do in our lives. We need to trust in God. Complete trust. We may not know where it will end up. Joshua had no idea what was going to happen. But Joshua trusted anyway. And he obediently follows through with faith.

In the wilderness God had used “the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night” as symbols of his leading, presence and protection. Now God has chosen to lead the people in a new way, by the “Ark of the covenant.” The ark symbolized the presence and power of God with His people. The presence of the Ark represented the person and promises of God. It was God Himself who was going before them as their source of victory. When we face times of crisis or when we need direction in life, we need to learn to be sensitive to the movement of the Lord in and around us.

Joshua’s next instruction was one of purification. The Israelites were to purify themselves. Look at verse 5. “Joshua told the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.’” Because Joshua trusted that the Lord would be doing amazing things, Joshua commanded the people to consecrate themselves. The point of the consecration is to remove sin from their lives. If God is going to do something powerful in our lives, we must get rid of the sin in our lives. We need to get rid of the bad habits of sin. That is the reason why Jesus prayed for his disciples, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17).

Joshua’s third instruction was to take up the ark and go. It is a message of commitment and following through. Look at verse 6. “Joshua said to the priests, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.’ So they took it up and went ahead of them.” Many times we begin to trust in the Lord and then we purify ourselves, but then we stop. We don’t follow through. We have a problem with commitment. All of us have become so self-centered that we do not want to commit to anything that will interrupt our schedule. If our schedule conflicts with God’s schedule, we need to change our schedule. God has placed in front of us tasks for which we are to do. That is teaching the Bible to 65,000 University of Toronto students. We must commit ourselves to do it, no matter what obstacles.

When we follow God’s direction we will know which way to go. The word of God is God’s great blessing to us. The word of God gives us direction. Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” Through the Bible, we know which way to go. Across the river were enemy cities like Jericho and Ai and Gibeon. Enemy cities were fortified with advance technologies and trained militaries. But no need to fear them. God is with Israel. As long as the Israelites followed the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord their God, they will know which way they must go. If you have a GPS, you don’t bother about directions. No matter how many times we miss the way, a soft-spoken lady simply says, “Recalculating…” Similarly, when we follow God’s words we cannot lose our way. God gives the directions; we only need to follow.

**Second**, crossing the Jordan River. Look at verses 7-8. “And the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’” It was here that God told Joshua what was going to happen. Joshua trusted in God and God told Joshua what would happen. General Joshua said to the Israelites, “Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God. This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites”(9-10). General Joshua believed that the word of God would be done as he had said.

Joshua continued to say, “See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you” (11). He convinced the people that they were not going first, but God would go into the Jordan ahead of them. Joshua said: “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” (13). “Go and stand in the river” is a terrifying command. Everyone knew that the River Jordan was at flood stage. But Joshua said, “Let the priests go there with the ark of God and its water flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.” What a suspenseful story. General Joshua had faith in God. He calls God “the Lord of all the earth.” It is a statement of God’s absolute sovereignty. When the Creator speaks, the Jordan River obediently rolls up in a heap. This miracle prepared the Israelites for the next 7 years of battle to conquer the Promised Land. If God can roll up the Jordan like a heap, the Canaanites, Hittites and all the rest could be conquered.

What was the people’s response? Verse 14 says, “So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the Lord went ahead of them.” Here we learn a deep truth. Leaders must have the word of God and they must go ahead of the people. Jesus said in John 10:4b, “He goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him.” This is exemplary leadership. Leaders should be good examples and good influences like Joshua. Then we can help our sheep to cross the Jordan River.

Look at verses 15-16. “Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, 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 (the Dead Sea) was completely cut off.” As their feet touched the stream the water stopped. What a spectacle! So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. There was a nervous problem for the priests. The people of Israel were crossing the River Jordan as on dry ground, but the priests might have doubted. “Wow, this huge number of our people are crossing. What will we do if the water divides and falls down on us?” If anybody is a leader, he experiences this kind of worry and agony weighing down their souls all the time. But the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm.

The priests had a very important role in crossing the Jordan. They had to carry the ark of the covenant. They had to go ahead of the people in their march toward the uncharted territory. They had to go into the swollen river before everyone else did. They had to be the first ones to get their feet wet. Now God told them to go and stand in the middle of the river while all Israel passed by until the whole nation completed the crossing. Look at verse 17. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground. What a tremendous responsibility the priests had! Like the priests in this passage, we must hold on to God’s promise by faith. We have much to learn from Joshua and the priests in order to become spiritual leaders.

There are a lot of crossover times in life. There are also many problems; problems that we have neither the strength nor the wisdom to meet. Disease and sickness can be very dramatic crossover times. Ph.D. study can be a crossover time. When I was a Ph.D. student, I did not have strength to study due to despair. I almost failed the qualifying exam. After the exam, one of the examiners said to me, “There are other things you can do in life besides math.” But somehow God gave me wisdom to complete the Ph.D. because I trusted in God. During my Ph.D. I kept average 5 one to one Bible studies a week. After experiencing God’s power, I began to live in a new level of Christian life by believing that God always provides. As we stand to face our crossover moments whatever they may be, we need to trust God, consecrate ourselves and follow through. Then great things will happen. We move on to the new level of Christianity. If you are facing a raging Jordan today, it may be your river of opportunity. It may be some habit, or passion, or problems. Do not be afraid to step into the water. As soon as you step into the water, the water will be cut off and you can cross the Jordan as God promised. Then you can live Christian life in a new level by experiencing God’s mighty power.

May God help us to cross our Jordan River in our lives to boldly claim God’s promise. May God help us to conquer the University of Toronto with the gospel of Jesus Christ this fall.