



Whenever you and I face a challenge, hardship or problem, one of the first things that goes out the window is perspective. One of the reasons we lose perspective is we are often too focused on the “close up” view rather than the “wide-angle” view. Take this ferocious creature for example (*spider under microscope*). That thing looks like something made for a horror film or what you'd see in the next *Star Wars* movie. With this view, none of us would ever want to mess around with it. But, from the wide-angle view, what you see is just a harmless common brown spider. And really you have nothing to fear, unless you have arachnophobia!

When it comes to living the Christian life, many of us, myself included, often focus too closely on all our problems, challenges, and obstacles. We tend to place them under the microscope of our lives and that leads to doubt, fear, worry, and stress. We lose perspective. But, if we can take the wide-angle view, we'll see that the Lord is always bigger and more powerful than any obstacle you will ever face. And that is what we are going to see as we study Joshua chapters three and four today. The only reason the Israelites were able to cross the mighty Jordan River was they were focused on the wide-angle view and remembered the Lord was in control over all, even the Jordan River. In chapter one, we saw the faith of Joshua, in chapter two, the faith of Rahab. Now, in chapters 3-4, we'll see the faith of an entire nation.

God Speaks to Joshua and Tells Him About the Miracle

Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests 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. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.”

The officer's message to the people: follow the ark! (Josh. 3:1-4).

After hearing a positive report from the spies, Joshua takes the people to the eastern edge of the Jordan River and there they waited for three days. For three days they heard and saw the raging Jordan River. We'll learn in a moment the river was at flood stage. For three days, they wondered how in the world an entire nation of people—families, toddlers and baggage—were

going to cross over to the other side. Three days of waiting. The river was under the microscope of tens of thousands of Israelites. I bet it was difficult to keep perspective. Three days of waiting tells me God's timing is never ideal. God's timing rarely works with ours. Ever notice that? God often puts us in seasons of waiting because his goal is to deepen our faith, not just get us to the other side!

Finally, the officers tell the people part of the plan, “Follow the ark of the covenant. Where it goes, you go.” The ark is so central to this chapter, it's mentioned 17 times. It was a rectangular box, made of acacia wood, 45 inches long, 27 inches wide and 27 inches high, overlaid with gold inside and out. Two golden cherubim (angels) were on top of the lid. The Ten Commandments and manna were inside the ark. Most importantly, the ark was a symbol of God's presence with his people. God, not Joshua, was ultimately leading and guiding his people, but they are warned to stay 1000 yards away from the ark because God is holy and you don't want to touch the ark. But practically speaking, giving the ark space allowed all Israel to see the ark and follow the route.

The point is this: God will lead, our responsibility is to follow. For the Israelites, it means looking to the ark—the wide-angle view—and not the raging river—the microscopic view. For us, we look to Jesus and not our current circumstances. Whenever we are faced with a giant obstacle, the temptation is always to go back to where it's safe. I guarantee there were folks who thought, “You know what, I kind of like it here in the desert!” But, God is constantly telling us to trust him. That means pressing on and going to where God is working. Follow the ark/Jesus!

Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you” (v. 5).

Joshua's Message to the People: Consecrate Yourselves

What we see in the Bible is this: some of God's promises are unconditional, meaning all we need to do is believe them, and some are conditional, meaning we have to meet certain conditions. Here, Joshua gives the people a conditional promise—consecrate yourselves and then God will do amazing things among you. The word consecration is an old word we don't use anymore. A similar word is used in the New Testament—sanctification. The word means to be set-apart, to be prepared and to be dedicated. Consecration meant a new beginning. It was a cleansing from sin. For the Israelites it involved washing

themselves and their clothes and abstaining from sex. They were getting themselves and their hearts ready for God's blessing. D.L. Moody famously said, "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man (woman) fully consecrated to him. By God's help, I aim to be that man." God moves through people who are fully consecrated to him.

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 (v. 6).

Joshua's Message to the Priests: Go to the Front

Joshua gives a very short message to the priests which required specific obedience: go to the front. The priests believed God's word through Joshua and did what he told them to do. I love these priests because without hesitation they go to the front of all the people, which meant right to the water's edge with the ark in hand. This took real courage and great faith for these priests. Faith always involves action. John Wimber once said that faith is spelled R-I-S-K. I said this a few weeks ago in Foster City, that what we need more of today are not brilliant people or clever new methods, but people who are willing to obey God and go to the front. Obeying God is never popular; it often doesn't make sense, and it can be really scary to follow God. The men and women in the Bible who failed miserably all stopped listening to God's voice and because of that God did not give them success. Where is God calling you to the front?

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'" (verses 7-8).

God Speaks to Joshua: I Am with You

God once again takes the initiative and speaks to Joshua and reminds him, "I am with you." This is the greatest promise of all in the book of Joshua. Even though Joshua was prepared, the people were ready and the priests were at the front, Joshua still needed to be reminded of God's presence. He needed to know that God will never let him down and will never let him go. He needed a wide-angle view of God. Remember, there is no Moses to fall back on anymore and there was a mighty river in front of them and enemies on the other side. Joshua needed courage and God gave it to him with the promise of his presence. That was the only assurance Joshua needed. And it's the only promise we need to face our problems as well. God is with you!

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. See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go

into the Jordan ahead of you. Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. 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" (verses 9-13).

Joshua's Second Message to the People: God's Going to do a Miracle!

Joshua hears from the Lord and passes it on to the people. He gives the nation a wide-angle view of God—God is going to do something amazing! Joshua says we are following the "living God" and the "Lord of all the earth." My God is not dead, he's alive and he's in charge! And this God is going ahead of us and opening up the way. He will stop the flow of the river, he will dry up the riverbed, and he will drive out the Canaanites. The focus here is on the power and might of God.

The People Must Obey God's Word to Experience the Miracle

So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. 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 (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. 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 (verses 14-17).

Most of the year the Jordan River was about a hundred feet wide, but during the spring flood season it became close to a mile wide and impossible to cross. So why did God tell them to cross now? God could have waited until summer when the flow was down. He could have led them to an easier spot to cross. I guess he could have told them to build a bridge. But God chose the most difficult time and place to cross so that he gets all the glory and his people learn to trust him. Unless you are willing to step out by faith, obey God's Word and trust him, God will not open the way for you either. Warren Wiersbe put it this way, "We never stand still in the Christian life; we either move forward in faith or go backward in unbelief." The priests are told to put their foot in the water and once they do, God promises to stop the river.

I've learned that God typically gives his people just enough information to take the very next step, "***We walk by faith, not by sight***" (2 Cor. 5:7). In what way is God asking you to get your feet wet?

Before I move on, let me say just one more thing. God can do the impossible, but it doesn't mean he always will. God is not a butler nor is he a heavenly Santa Claus always giving you what you want. Yes, nothing is impossible for God, but he never promises to always and in every situation do the impossible for you. He knows what's best. But, when he doesn't work the way we hope we wonder why. And we think, well maybe I am not consecrated enough, or maybe I haven't obeyed enough, or maybe God isn't really with me after all, or maybe his promises are not for me. Those are the wrong questions. We need to let God be God. So we pray. And we trust him no matter what.

When God doesn't seem to do the impossible in our lives, we need to lean into Romans 8:28, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* It doesn't matter what you think or how you feel or what is going on in your life. If you are a follower of Jesus, he is at work! And this verse doesn't say all things that happen are good. Some things are terrible and happen for no reason at all. Things don't always work together for good either. Suffering is not good but God is at work for our good. So, no matter what happens—good, bad, ugly, whatever—God works for good in **all** things! That means we don't need to fear because God can and will take anything and all things and use it for our good somehow and some way. What is God doing in your life that is causing you to depend on him more?

When God Moves Miraculously, Remember It by Telling the Next Generation

As we turn to chapter four, we see Israel on the other side of the river and finally in the promised land. In this chapter the focus is on remembering and memorializing the grace and goodness of God. We all love to remember and celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, graduations and other big events. But, remembering is also an essential part of what it means to be a follower of God. God speaks to Joshua again and gives him instructions about taking 12 stones and making a memorial both in the Jordan River and where they camp at Gilgal.

In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever" (verses 6b-7).

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Command the priests carrying the ark of the covenant law to come up out of the Jordan."

So Joshua commanded the priests, "Come up out of the Jordan."

And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the

waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before.

On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God" (verses 15-24).

Monuments and memorials are often built to remind people in the future about something that people in the present consider too important to ever forget. Monuments are ideas set in stone. They are an attempt to place some fact or some understanding of history beyond dispute—this man was heroic; this war was good; these people should be remembered. The Bible is full of memorials as well. Every time Noah saw a rainbow, it would remind him of God's promise to never destroy the earth again. God gave Israel several feasts and festivals to help them remember who God is and what he did for them. One of the most important was the Passover, a meal to remind God's people of how God protected and delivered them out of slavery in Egypt. Today, Christians celebrate another meal of remembrance—the Lord's Supper. It reminds us of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, his broken body and his shed blood.

In chapter four we come to another great moment in the history of Israel. The people of God finally enter the promised land and after the miracle it took to get them there, God tells them to create a memorial to remember who God is and what he did on that day. The problem Israel had is the same one we all have today. We tend to forget the things we need to remember and we remember the things we need to forget. The grind of life in the Bay Area chips away at each one of us every day and we slowly forget who God is and what he has done in our lives. We often wonder if God is truly always good all the time. We often doubt if God is always with us and fighting for us. We sometimes even doubt if he truly loves us, especially after we've messed up. We worry about the future and often forget about all those times God has answered our prayers. We too need to remember.

What do these stones mean? The 12 stones symbolize the whole nation of Israel and its 12 unique tribes. They were a "sign" pointing to the miracle God did and how he brought them into the promised land. The stones, like our monuments today, will forever be used to teach future generations, especially in times of trouble, to fear the Lord. Future generations will need to

know everything that happened so that they don't forget the goodness and grace of God. Why is this important? Because forgetfulness is the enemy of faith. I heard someone this week say, "Spiritual amnesia leads to apathy and apathy leads to apostasy." This is why we gather on Sunday mornings and in our ministries throughout the week, to remember Jesus Christ. We need times of corporate worship, instruction and fellowship. We need to hear stories from others about how the Lord has been good and faithful. This is why we have a committed team who works with children and students so that we can help you pass on your faith to the next generation. This is why we take communion to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Spiritual amnesia, leads to apathy and apathy leads to apostasy."

What's the point of these two chapters? God speaks, we obey. God moves, we remember. What kind of Jordan River are you facing today? What is that obstacle that's wearing on you? What is it that discourages you? Or pulls you far from God? Or frightens you? Smash the microscope that you've put that issue under and replace it with a wide-angle lens. God has spoken to you in his Word. Trust him. Obey him. And when he moves on your behalf, never forget it and always tell the next generation of the goodness and grace of our God.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1423-3N