



Do you ever feel like the men in this picture (*picture of boulder in the road*)? You're facing an obstacle in your life that you just can't get around? Meaning that there's something in your life that you view as an obstacle, blocking your way to get to where you want to be? You're **here** in your career but someone is blocking your way to get there. You're **here** as a parent but someone is blocking your way to be a great parent, probably your child! You're **here** and a health problem is in between you and health. You're **here** and a substance is in between you and sobriety. We all have them. They come and go through our lives and God's Word today, in Joshua 3 and 4, is going to teach us how to respond to them.

As a quick recap, God's people have been wandering in the desert for 40 years. In Joshua 1 a new leader was established over the people. That's Joshua. In Joshua 2 spies were sent to the Promised Land to check it out. Today in Joshua 3-4 the journey for God's people kicks into high gear and we see some miraculous action. The people of God are going to cross the Jordan River. This story is spread over chapters 3-5. Today we'll be reading and learning from chapters 3-4.

**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" (verses 1-4).**

God is saying to his people, "You know how to prepare, you know your routines, you know your surrounding geography, you know what you know. But I know that and everything else. And I'm going to expand the capacity of your heart today. I am taking you somewhere you know nothing about. This territory will be unfamiliar to you. But it's not unfamiliar to me. Stick close to me and I will lead you, step-by-step."

**"But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits (1000 yards) between you and the ark; do not**

**go near it." Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you" (v. 5).**

So, the preparations are complete, it's time to enter the Promised Land. In these opening verses God is laying out some general instructions: Follow the Ark of the Covenant wherever it goes and consecrate yourselves. Next come instructions that are more specific.

**The Lord said to Joshua: "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.' ... Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest..." (Josh. 3:8, 15).**

At this point, someone in the group was raising their hand, "OK. We heard that the Lord wants us to follow the Ark of the Covenant wherever it goes, but that river is crazy! Why would God lead us into a river like that?" The floodplain of the Jordan River ranged between 200 yards and 1 mile wide. The floodplain was packed with tangled bush and jungle growth. It was intimidating and loud.

If you'd give me the freedom to speculate just a bit... how would these desert wanderers know how to swim? For their entire lives they've lived in the sand. The extent of their knowledge of water would have been small natural springs of calm water that they'd use for drinking. They've heard the stories of how God parted the Red Sea so they could escape from the Egyptian army, but they weren't there to see it with their own eyes! God was presenting them with a situation that was way beyond the boundaries of their faith. I mentioned earlier obstacles we face; the obstacle they were facing was the raging river. They were **here**, they wanted to get over **there**. And this river was in the way.

Imagine being one of the Levite priests who are carrying the Ark of the Covenant. You're on the side of the ark, carrying it with three other people on each side. You have to use poles to carry the Ark because if you touch the ark, you'll die because the holiness of God resides on the ark.

As you approach the raging river, the sound grows. You're stumbling on rocks and roots. The Ark would not have been easy to carry down the steep incline of the Jordan Valley!

What are you thinking if you're in the very front? Probably, "Hey, quit pushing. Slow down. The river is getting closer. Man, this thing is heavy. Can we just take a break? Oh, Lord, why does following you into unfamiliar territory always involve something scary? A raging river, really!"

Meanwhile, the one million mass of people is standing on the ridge of the Jordan Valley, looking down. They have a perfect vantage point to see everything. It is no coincidence that the Lord led his people to cross the Jordan River at the time a year when such an action looked and was impossible. Even an Olympic swimmer would be a fool to try to cross this river in their own strength. But God delights to show his power in the face of our utter helplessness. In order to experience a miracle, you have to face something that's bigger than you.

Pastor Dale Davis in his commentary on Joshua says, "Perhaps God brings us into impossible circumstances, situations so bleak and hopeless, for the very purpose of impressing upon us that if we make it through, if we endure it, if we are not overwhelmed and washed away, it will be only because of his grace and power."

**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 (Josh. 3:15-17).**

Imagine the thrill of exhilaration! With every step people made and with every step people watched others make, their confidence grew. God is really doing this. Seriously, it's really happening. There are no leaks. There's no need for human ingenuity. No doubt, the people would have been thinking the same thing we'd be thinking, "if the Lord can do this, he can do anything."

**When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and**

**put them down at the place where you stay tonight" (Josh. 4:1-3).**

**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 (verses 15-18).**

Imagining you were one of those priests, what would you have been thinking? Would any of you want to turn around and do it again?

**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 (verses 20-23).**

The parallel of this miracle and the crossing of the Red Sea is significant. God used the crossing of the Red Sea to validate Moses' leadership with the Israelites and God used the crossing of the Jordan River to validate Joshua's leadership with the Israelites.

This is a sensational and amazing story! We've got a miracle, fear and faith, a memorial, and in the end, transformed, confident people. You've probably resonated with part of this story and sensed the Lord speaking to your heart. That's the way the Spirit works when we read his Word. I'd like to add three observations, three purposes God had when he inspired this to be included in his Word.

- **Mentions of the Ark of the Covenant**
- **Stones of Remembrance**
- **One Lesson**

### **Mentions of the Ark of the Covenant**

In chapters 3 and 4 it's significant and purposeful that God mentions the Ark of the Covenant 17 times. Pastor and commentator James Boice says, "this is the most important thing about the crossing of the Jordan River."

In Old Testament narratives, one of the ways God makes his point is by repetition. What's so important about the Ark of the Covenant? The Ark was God's presence among the people. God himself went first as they entered the Promised Land. God himself will go first as they conquer the Promised Land. And God himself will always go first if his people will follow and if his people will slow down and wait.

That's the way it works in any spiritual activity. We never lead and we never go alone. We can say "yes, I'll follow." We can say "no, I'm going my own way." We can say "no, I've got this in my own ingenuity."

As Roger Huang has led City Impact in San Francisco's Tenderloin, he's been a model of "yes, I'll follow." When Roger sensed from the Lord that City Impact needed a building in San Francisco but had no money, Roger started walking around the perimeter of the city praying and fasting. And God provided a building. When Roger sensed from the Lord that zoning ordinances should change so that strip clubs could not be located next door to where kids played, he sat in front of City Hall on a 40-day prayer and fasting vigil. Roger structured his entire life around letting God go first. And he did that by praying and waiting and praying.

Let me share with you how the Lord has been growing me in this area over the past couple of months.

My natural inclination, when I face one of my obstacles, is to lead with my creative and strategic mind or my friendly personality! However, the Lord doesn't want me to lead with them. Instead he wants me to lead by praying thoroughly and then to follow that prayer with action, if necessary.

During this season, the Lord is teaching me to lead with prayer when I face obstacles. It's by doing this that I make room for God to go first. By leading with prayer, we give a kind of activation to the Spirit of God that lives within every believer. The Israelites only experienced God's presence at a distance, through the Ark of the Covenant. The Christian has that same Spirit inside of them. And through Jesus Christ, the Christian is filled with that same Spirit. We're made righteous and *"the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"* (James 5:16).

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China said, "learn to move man, through God, by prayer alone." Many of the obstacles we face in life are another person. Why not try Hudson Taylor's approach to move them through God, by prayer alone? The 17 mentions of the Ark of the Covenant is a megaphone shouting, "God goes first, follow him. He is powerful!"

## 12 Stones of Remembrance

These physical stones weren't special, they were simply stones from the river bed. But their symbolism was special. God wanted the people to have a physical reminder because like us, they tended to forget the goodness and mighty acts of God. God knew that forgetfulness was the greatest enemy to the faith of followers. And forgetfulness is the greatest threat to our faith today as well. Because of this tendency and weakness, God is setting his people up to remember with these 12 stones.

The generation of people who crossed the river would need to be reminded of God's goodness and his power because they would face daunting challenges as they battled the Canaanites to take the Promised Land. The next generation of people would need to be reminded of God's goodness and his power because they didn't see it with their own eyes, yet they will face daunting challenges as they follow God's adventure of faith too. The people of the whole earth needed the memorial as a testimony to the existence and nature of the one true, all-powerful God of the universe. The 12 stones are intended to jar our memories to remember, "God goes first, follow him. He is powerful!"

### One Lesson

The one lesson has been hinted at and woven throughout, but let me state it simply and clearly: Know that the Living God is among you and he is powerful.

**This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the ... (Josh. 3:10).**

**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 (Josh. 4:24).**

Because the Living God is among you and powerful, this means that the follower of Jesus should be:

- Confident – not fearful
- Peaceful – not anxious or worried
- Settled – not hurried and scurried
- Leading through prayer – not leading in our own strengths
- Secure – not threatened

As you think about the obstacle that's blocking you, Jesus invites you to deal with it by making room for God to deal with it.

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

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