

Sam Storms

Bridgeway Church

Joshua #4

Sermon Summary #4

The God of the Unlikely Time

Joshua 3:1-17

There is one particular scene in the Academy Award winning, WWII, film, *Patton*, that seems appropriate for me to mention in conjunction with our text in Joshua today. George C. Scott, who starred in the title role, stood erect as his aides pinned on his shoulders the star signifying that he was now a three-star General. Omar Bradley, himself a two-star General, stood nearby, obviously horrified by what he was witnessing. "George," he said, "I know you've been nominated by the President but that doesn't become official until ratified by Congress." To which Patton calmly replied: "*Yes, well, Congress has its schedule, and I have mine!*"

Have you ever found yourself saying that about God? There's simply no way around it: our schedule and God's, more times than not, seem out of sync. He either acts earlier than we had expected or later than we had hoped. The result is that we are either impatient with God or choose to act impetuously, while on other occasions we are lazy and inactive. In any case, we live our lives as if saying, "*Well, God has his schedule and I have mine.*"

Sometimes it's almost understandable. After all, God often chooses to do things at the most awkward and inconvenient of times. It strikes us as either too early or too late. We can't understand why he doesn't adapt his schedule to ours or adjust his plans to conform to ours.

I suspect that's how the Israelites must have felt as they stood on the banks of the Jordan River, prepared to enter the promised land of Canaan. They learned a lesson there, on that day, a lesson that all of us must learn sooner or later. The lesson is simply that the God we love and serve, the only true God, is often *the God of the unlikely time!* Let me explain what I mean.

When the two spies returned from Jericho, Joshua received the news he had been waiting for: "And they said to Joshua, 'Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us'" (Joshua 2:24).

Upon hearing this, they break camp and travel the 10 miles from Shittim to the banks of the Jordan. There they remained for three days. **Three days!** Why three days? Think about it: God forced them to stand and watch the raging waters of the Jordan River for three days. The torrent was unabated. They could only look across the rising waters into Canaan, on the other side. The river seemed utterly impassable. Their long journey to the promised land appeared to have ended just short of their goal. Why did God bring them to the edge of the river and compel them to look with longing and frustration at the land he had promised to their forefathers? His reason seems clear: ***To drive home to their hearts the seeming impossibility of tomorrow!***

God compelled them to wait three days *to allow their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and inadequacy to reach the highest level possible*. He forced them to wait until the waters of that river had risen to such a height that virtually all hope had been washed away.

One can well imagine the *murmuring and grumbling* among the people as they sat around their campfires at night: “I don’t about you, but I’m starting to have second thoughts about Joshua. My confidence in his leadership is starting to waver. Are we really sure he has what it takes to bring us into the land? Bringing us here in flood season was an obvious mistake. I can’t believe that Moses would have ever committed such an obvious blunder!”

Perhaps the most significant statement in chapter three is v. 15 – **“now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest.”** Think about it: it has taken them almost 40 years of wandering in circles in the wilderness to get here, and now this!

Often we find ourselves asking the question: What does God expect of me? What does he want? The answer is that *he wants a people who will faithfully answer his call to act in the pursuit of his promises even at the most unlikely time*.

In the case of the Israelites, it’s almost as if the waters of the Jordan are analogous to the way our own circumstances rise up to oppose us and to declare their victory over us. It’s almost as if the waters are saying: “You’ll *never* enter the land! You’ll *never* inherit the promise! No matter what God has assured you is coming, we are here to make sure it doesn’t happen!”

Think about your own journey to this point in life. Perhaps you are only moments away from seeing come to fruition a *dream* that you’ve nurtured for years. Perhaps there is some *massive problem* that is on the verge of being solved, or a *fractured relationship* that is close to be healed, or a *life-long prayer* that may finally be answered in the way you have long desired. God may be speaking to you much the same way he was to the Israelites, saying:

“Stand up! Be firm in your faith! The day of inheritance is here. The moment for fulfillment has arrived. As difficult as it may be for you to understand, I’ve actually chosen this challenging and demanding moment precisely because it affords the greatest opportunity for my power and love to be seen when I finally step into the situation and bring it all to pass!”

In the case of the people of Israel, Joshua called on them to do four things, each of which may be adaptable to our circumstances today.

(1) They were called upon to focus wholly and exclusively on God and to follow his presence (vv. 2-4).

The prominence of the “ark of the covenant” indicates that this was more than a military maneuver. This was *a celebration of God’s presence* among his people and their call to join in procession as he acted on their behalf.

The ark was 45x27x27 inches. It was overlaid with gold. Two cherubim or angelic figures hovered over the mercy seat. Inside the ark were the two tablets containing the 10 Commandments, some manna in a jar, and Aaron's rod that had budded. See 1 Samuel 4:4; Psalms 80:1; 99:1.

They are commanded to stay 2,000 cubits away from the ark. A "cubit" was the length from the tip of a man's extended fingers to his elbow, generally around 18 inches. So we're talking here about approximately 1,000 yards.

Why are they told to remain at such a distance from it? On the one hand it may be a reminder yet again of the holiness of God and the caution with which the people are to approach him. However, I think it's more likely designed to enable all the people actually to see the ark and follow it. If they had crowded in closely around it, only a small number could have seen it. The point is that ***they were being called upon to focus on God, fix their eyes on God and his presence, and to follow him.*** Don't look at the flood waters of the Jordan. Take your eyes off the adverse and oppositional circumstances that stand in your way and fix your focus on God!

Of course, for us today we are called upon to fix the eyes of our faith on Jesus. As the author of Hebrews put it, we are to be "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

(2) They were also called upon to consecrate and sanctify themselves (v. 5).

The word "consecrate" (v. 5) means to separate unto a holy purpose; it means to set aside from that which is common and mundane so that one might be *wholly and exclusively devoted to God* and his purposes and his glory. In the case of the Israelites, this would have entailed fasting, washing of their clothes, and abstinence from sexual relations for a short season of time. All such external deeds were designed to symbolize or represent an internal resolve to examine one's life, confess all known sin, repent, and to set oneself apart unto God.

The point is that if we are to enjoy God's presence and to experience his power in bringing us into possession of our promised inheritance, we must have *single-minded devotion and holiness of life*. God simply will not bless or endorse our indifference toward him or our half-hearted commitment. See Isaiah 59:1-2.

(3) They had to step out in faith (vv. 6-13).

Let me highlight several things of importance in this paragraph.

First, v. 7 calls for comment in two respects. On the one hand, this isn't something Joshua said to the people, but rather something God said to Joshua. There is a sense in which Joshua could have legitimately repeated to Israel precisely what God had said to him. God had indeed appointed him leader and invested him with authority over them. But there is no hint of arrogance or authoritarianism in Joshua. His sole concern was that God be honored, not himself. He aimed for God's glory to be central, not his own.

On the other hand, we need to be careful about the way we apply this passage to us today. *Many make the mistake of trying to take an OT model for leadership and apply it to the NT church.* They assume that the kind of authority and prominence given to men such as Moses and Joshua should also be extended to local church leaders today. No! Nowhere in the NT is any single individual elevated in the way Joshua was. The church is not a geo-political nation as was Israel. Leadership in the church is granted to a plurality of men called Elders. So let's be careful how we use the OT!

One of the great tragedies in our day is the repeated occurrence of popular and powerful Christian leaders falling into sexual sin or financial scandal or, through the exercise of excessive and unilateral authority, being the cause of church splits and relational ruptures. All too often this comes as a result of investing in one person a power and authority that the Bible nowhere endorses. Such "leaders" are accountable to no one, or at most to an inner circle of "yes" men who serve only to insulate and guard the leader from outside influence or criticism.

Such "leaders" are thought to possess the Holy Spirit in a heightened degree. They are especially, uniquely, and extraordinarily "anointed" to a degree beyond that which is available to the ordinary Christian and in such a way as to put them beyond evaluation or critique. The result is that what they say or do is regarded as inviolable. They speak with the authority of God himself and cannot be challenged. Or if you do challenge them, you quickly find yourself out of a job or demoted or relegated to the margins of church life. Such "leaders" begin to think of themselves as exempt from routine biblical standards of conduct when it comes to sexuality or money.

Let me say this as clearly and forcefully as I can. If you ever find yourself in a church or ministry or situation in which the leader or pastor is beyond criticism and answers to no one but himself, **run away!** If you find yourself in a church where the senior or lead pastor cannot be disciplined or removed from his role in the church, **run away!** If you find yourself in a situation where the leader has arbitrary and ultimate authority over every decision, **run away!**

I'm not saying we can't learn from the lives and ministries of Moses and Joshua and David in the OT. Of course we can. That's why we're studying this book! *But that doesn't mean that the structures of spiritual authority operative in the Old Covenant are to be applied to the life of the church in the New Covenant.*

Second, observe how Joshua describes God to the people. He is "the living God" (v. 10). All the idols and deities of the people who stand in our way are dead and lifeless. Our God alone lives!

Joshua wants them to realize that, as one person has put it, "God" is not merely a three-letter word! He is not the president of our club or the honorary captain of our team. He is the one true living God who works and saves and delivers and heals and triumphs over his enemies on behalf of his people.

Again, notice in vv. 11 and 13 that he is "the Lord of all the earth." He is not a tribal deity. His sovereign rule extends to every molecule in the world. This clearly provides theological justification for the expulsion of the seven nations that currently inhabit Canaan. **God owns everything!** The land is his to give and to take away as he sees fit. He has the authority to distribute and re-distribute as he pleases. As Dale R. Davis put it: "we must renounce our tendency to 'punify' God, to carve him down to our stature and limit him to our possibilities" (36).

Third, note that nothing would happen so long as they stood still. They had to step out in faith. In their case, it was a literal, physical step of faith. *They had to get their feet wet!* According to v. 13, it wasn't until "the soles of the feet" of the priests actually made contact with the waters of the Jordan that the miracle would occur.

There's a lesson for us here. *You can focus on God, you can have faith in God, you can consecrate yourselves and prepare your hearts, but until you actually take that initial step forward into what God has called you to do, it's doubtful anything will happen.*

Let me apply this to praying for the sick. As I've often said, it isn't enough merely to be "open" to spiritual gifts or to the theoretical possibility that God heals the sick today through and in response to our prayers for them. God is unlikely to heal someone simply because you think he does that sort of thing today. You must step out in faith, pull your hands out of your pockets, lay them on the sick and pray fervently and often.

Fourth, it's also important to see that they were told to step into the Jordan *without any prior visible evidence that the water was going to part!* You don't hear them saying anything like:

"OK, Lord, we're prepared to step into the Jordan, but *first* we'd like to see some indication that you're really going to honor your promise and part the waters. All we're asking for is a teeny-weeny little ripple. Just the smallest of waves will be enough for us!"

No! God has spoken to them and at least on this occasion that's enough. God had said to them, "I've told you what to do and what I'll do if you do it. So do it!"

John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard, was often heard to say that "Faith" is spelled "R-I-S-K"! I think he has been misunderstood. John wasn't saying that faith is like jumping off a cliff into a dark and unknown valley below. He wasn't saying that faith is altogether disconnected from good reasons or solid evidence. He wasn't suggesting that God takes risks or that it is risky to trust or believe in God. He was saying that all we need to justify our obedience, all we need to find warrant for trusting God and acting upon it, is his word. His promise is the grounds for our faith. It feels risky from our point of view. There's always a risk that people will laugh at us. But like the Israelites, we don't wait for a ripple in the water before we put in our toe. God said, "Stand in it and I will part the waters for you."

(4) Having stepped out in faith, they were to stand still and wait on the power of God (vv. 8, 17).

A miracle was required if the people were to enter the land, but so too was needed a people willing to move toward the miracle. We are to step out in faith, and then stand still as we wait for God's power!

Apply to situations in life where you've done what God has required and you wait patiently and faithfully for a divine breakthrough . . .

Observe God's power as it is portrayed in vv. 14-17! Remember, it is the time of the early summer harvest. The river is swollen from spring rain. Try to envision the scene in your mind:

The waters of the Jordan have risen to flood stage. They are frightening and imposing and present what appears to be an insurmountable obstacle. Tens of thousands of Israelites stand at the river's edge, with yet thousands more behind them. Soldiers and old men and young women and mothers and nursing infants and teen-aged kids, together with the flocks of sheep and goats and cattle brought up out of Egypt all stand, wide-eyed with anticipation!

And there, standing in the river, are the priests, holding up the Ark on their shoulders. The space around was clear for 1,000 yards so all could see what happened next. A hush fell upon and among the people.

What they saw next must have been shocking beyond words. The level of water in the river began to drop, ever so slowly. According to v. 16, "***the waters coming down from above, stood and rose up in a heap very far away.***" By "very far away" he means 19 miles, at the city of Adam = modern day Damiya, Jordan.

For the language, "rose up in a heap," see Exodus 15:8 and Psalm 78:13. What we see happening here is a repeat performance of what God did to the waters of the Red Sea when he first delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt.

Not only were the waters *dammed up* by God's mighty power, but the ground beneath their feet was *dried up* (v. 17). No muddy ground, no sloppy sloshing through piles of swamp, but perfectly dry ground on which to walk!

I have to mention once more the timing of this event. After 40 years of wandering they arrived at the river's edge. Even then they were forced to wait three more days. Even then they had arrived when the river was at flood stage. Why? "Yahweh delights to show his might in the face of our utter helplessness, apparently so that we cannot help seeing that we contribute nothing to our deliverance" (Davis, 38).

So, how was this event brought to pass? The river channel was 90-100 ft. across with an extremely strong current.

On December 8, 1267, an earthquake in the region dammed the river for 15-20 hours. It happened yet again on July 11, 1927. See Judges 5:4-5 and Psalm 114:3-4, 7. So, yes, God could have used an earthquake to produce this miracle.

However, God had told Joshua the precise time this would occur three days before the waters stopped. If an earthquake did cause the damming of the waters, clearly God caused the earthquake!

But notice that the water returned to full flow not because of an earthquake but when the final foot of the last Israelite touched the opposite bank in Canaan (v. 17b and especially **4:18**). See 2 Kings 2:8, 14.

Conclusion:

The first parting of the waters was at the Red Sea as Israel made its *exit*, its exodus out of slavery, out of bondage. The second parting of the waters was at the Jordan River as Israel made its *entrance* into the promised land of Canaan. There's a lesson here. Often Christians thank God for their initial salvation, their initial deliverance from bondage to sin, but then walk in fear and hesitation when God calls upon us to enter into our promised inheritance. Initial saving faith seems easy by comparison with daily, sanctifying faith.

Getting out of your personal bondage in the "Egypt" of your sin is only the beginning. God wants to lead you on into your promised inheritance. Reach! Stretch! Trust! Even when the time seems unlikely and the obstacles seem insurmountable.