

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

Introduction

Joshua chapter 3 records the miracle of the children of Israel crossing the Jordan river. In this chapter we have a picture of God's desire to sanctify the people (vv.1-5) and magnify the ministry of Joshua (vv.6-8); glorify the Lord (vv.9-13) and verify God's word (vv.14-17).

Joshua and the leaders have received the spies report (chapter 2). Jericho is vulnerable. But how in the world would Joshua lead such a large population into the promised land when their way was blocked by a swollen river?

The way seemed impossible. But Joshua believed God could make the impossible possible.

We all face what seems like impossible circumstances. We have loved ones who remain unsaved. We have husbands or wives playing Russian roulette with their marriages. We have children in rebellion. We battle with difficulties both public and private. We stand on the shores of what looks like impossible uncrossable rivers.

In this chapter the Ark of the Covenant is referenced some ten times. The Ark represented or symbolized the presence of God. The Ark would go before the people to lead them and it would be kept in the Jordan river until all the nation had safely passed to the other side. The Lord Jesus does just that—Christ goes before His people and opens the way. But the people must sanctify themselves (see 2 Corinthians 7:1) and be prepared to follow the Lord's leading.

Personal Preparation To Cross The Jordan (vv.1-4)

Joshua 3:1-4 (NKJV) 1Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over.

2So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp;

Why the delay? Joshua gets up early and evaluates the circumstance (prays and seeks God). The river is swollen and overflowing. It is the time of the harvest (v.15).

Thank God that Joshua does not have to fabricate a plan or invent a method of crossing the flooded Jordan. Joshua will receive instructions from the Lord Himself.

3and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it.

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

4Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before."

Joshua instructs the people to follow the Ark of the Covenant.

We might note that the cloud and the pillar of fire are no longer the source of guidance. The first to advance into the promised land will be the priests and the Levites. They will bear the Ark. The Ark represented the presence of God in the midst of the people.

Part of the point of this passage is God's willing to lead in a new way (the ark of the covenant)!

Real problems? Yes! But now the children of Israel are invited to believe the message of faith! The only way to cross and enter the Promised Land would be to enter by faith!

They would have to follow the Ark (God's presence); they would have to believe in such a way that they would be willing to follow God!

The people would have to keep their distance (v.4). Two thousand cubits (3,000 feet or about 1,000 yards).

For what reason? A show of reverence. We have a saying that familiarity breeds contempt. We also have a saying out of sight out of mind. How do we maintain the proper of balance of drawing near to the Lord and all the while retaining a healthy view of His holiness and God's utter righteousness?

God is holy. There is no casual or cavalier attitude that is suggested. We approach God with profound respect and utter regard for His dignity and majesty. The Lord God is Sovereign and Holy.

Walter Chantry reminds us that. . . "The Bible as a whole speaks more of God's holiness than of His love." Jonathan Edward wrote; "A true love of God must begin with a delight in his holiness, and not with a delight in any other attribute; for no other attribute is truly lovely without this."

Charles Hodge: "Holiness is the end of redemption, for Christ gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all inquiry and purify unto Himself a peculiar people zealous of good works."

The Ark of the Covenant was to lead them in an unfamiliar territory and unfamiliar ground, held by the enemies of Israel. **The children of Israel would need God's leadership and guidance for every step in this new territory.**

Donald K. Campbell writes;

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

“Every step you and I take in our lives is like that: a step into unknown, unfamiliar, and perilous territory. We don’t know what the next step may bring us: an accident, an illness, a heart attack, the loss of a spouse or a child or a close friend, a major financial reversal, the loss of a job, betrayal, opposition, an unfair accusation—perhaps even death itself. Like the Israelites under Joshua’s leadership, you and I need to see and know that is going before us, leading the way into the promised land. We need to hear the reassuring voice of God saying to us, “Be strong! Be courageous! Follow me!” (*No Time For Neutrality; A Study Of Joshua p.49*).

Personal Consecration For The Crossing (vv.5-13)

5And Joshua said to the people, “Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.”

You would think Joshua would say; “Gear up gentleman. Sharpen your swords. Polish your shields. Gather your courage”. Why does Joshua say; “Sanctify yourselves?” Because this is a spiritual battle! This is a spiritual walk. This is not something that is going to require weapons of war but rather faith. This task doesn’t call for shields or swords (except for the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit). No—there is a miracle that God will do—great wonders among you! God will do a miracle. God will do the impossible. God will take them to the place that He has set aside for them.

2 Corinthians 7:1; “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

What does it mean to sanctify oneself? It means a radical departure from sin and radical turning to God.

But some people, instead of fearing God fear holiness. They think it something strange, something odd.

In the New Testament Paul writes (Romans 12:1-2) “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Do you desire spiritual victory? Are you willing to radically separate yourself from sin? Are you willing to purify yourselves? Are you willing to be set apart and dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you interested in His will for your lives?

Think about what is happening in the text! **Joshua tells them to expect the impossible! They were to eagerly await the miracle God would work on their behalf.**

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

6Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.

7And the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.

The Lord will be glorified. But sometimes God elevates His servants that the people might honor the servant.

After David's death the Lord gave special honors to Solomon (1 Chronicles 29:25); "So the Lord exalted Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed on him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel."

Joshua was tasked with leading and guiding the people and the priests. We magnify the Lord Jesus Christ (see Phil. 1:20-21); but God delights in magnifying His people when they obey Him (see Acts 5:12-13).

8You shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.'

The Priest's holding the Ark were to remain in the river until all the congregation passed over.

9So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God."

10And Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites:

11Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan.

12Now therefore, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe.

13And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap."

Now Joshua describes how the children of Israel can expect their miracle! Joshua describes how God will accomplish the impossible. It was time to establish and confirm Joshua's credentials as

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

God's representative and guide into the Land of Promise. What better way to do that than to part a river and pass right through it!

Joshua does not say—"God is going to do this miracle to make me look good!" No God is going to do this miracle to glorify Himself! The miracle was intended to certify that God is the living God—in stark utter contrast to the dead lifeless—empty—idols of the pagan peoples. God will drive out the enemies (v.10). Seven deadly enemies are listed! God isn't going to simply bring them into the land; God is going to provide a way to drive out the seven tribes occupying the land.

Joshua reminds us that the living God is with us! And this is both the slogan and the cry for the children of Israel. Our God is with us! Our God is alive! Our God will provide victory over our enemies!

I read the story of a lady who lived during the Civil War. Her home was in Moresfield, West Virginia. It was the dividing line between the North and the South. During the war the towns fortunes would ebb and flow between North and South. One day it would be in Confederate hands. The next day Union hands. One morning Yankee troops rudely stomped up to her porch. She was completely at their mercy. Sometimes soldiers would simply break in and take what they wanted. But she was a Southern lady and invited the soldiers to come into her house and sit at her table. She set breakfast before them. She said, "It is a custom of long standing in this home to have devotions before meal." She took up her Bible and read; "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the Strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident."

When she finished reading, she set her Bible aside and began to pray. As she prayed she heard the sound of footsteps and she opened her eyes and the soldiers were gone. Her calm and courage in the presence of her enemies made them afraid to stay!

Personal Completion Of The Crossing (vv.14-17)

14 So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people,

15 and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest),

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

This was the time of the barley harvest (Nisan March-April). Spring. Water runs off from Mount Hermon. Approaching the swollen river their faith is about to be tested. **Would they hesitate in fear or go forward in faith?**

The Priests of Israel were not expected to act in Blind faith and neither are we!

Their faith and our faith is based on the rock solid reliability of all that God has said and done! We don't believe just anything! We believe what God has said. We believe what God has promised!

Campbell mentions the story of two people talking about the promises of God. "What do you do with the promises of God?" A person asked. "I underline them in blue ink" was the reply. Clearly God isn't interested in us simply underlining the promise, or reading the promise in a little promise book; God expects us to act on His promises (see p.52).

Like the priests on the banks of the Jordan River we must appropriate the promises of God and make them our own. We must put one foot in front of the other and start marching in the direction of our own impossible river!

16that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

17Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.

Now the drama comes to a full head! The priests place their feet in the swirling river! To the north something happens—the waters pile in a heap some great distance to the north in a town called Adam—near Zarethan—while the water flowing towards the Dead Sea is completely cut off. The people cross!

Archeologists claim this city Adam might be Tell-ed-Damiyeh—some 15-16 miles above the fording place near Jericho. Some claim a natural explanation. They point out an earthquake on December 8, 1267—caused the high banks of the Jordan to collapse near this place—damming the river for some 10 hours. Again there was an earthquake on July 11, 1927 that caused the river to stop.

Does God use natural things to accomplish supernatural purposes? I think the answer is yes. Did God allow a genuine miracle to take place? My answer is yes. I think the best way to look at this is that God accomplished His will in a way completely unknown to us!

Impossible Rivers

Joshua 3:1-17

All that the Lord said came to pass! The Jordan river was impassable. The children of Israel faced an impossible situation. In order to deal with the impossible situation they had to hear and believe the message of faith. But the message of faith had to translate to the walk of faith! The only way to experience the power of God was to walk in faith towards the Presence of God. The Priests led the way. They crossed because of the mighty power of God, and the miracle of God. The Jordan River suddenly stops flowing from upstream. As soon as the priest's feet touched the water's edge it piled up in a great heap near the city of Adam some 18 miles to the north. The river was completely cut off. They crossed because they believed in the power of God and witnessed the miracle of God and walked through through dry ground (v.17). By faith they believed that the raging waters would be held back and through faith they priests (ministers) stood in the middle of the Jordan until all had passed (v.17).

Conclusion

Crossing the river meant no turning back. It meant that they would be committed to struggle against armies, and fortified cities and enemies. The river was going to close behind them. They had made a decision—to face the obstacles by faith! They were committed to walking by faith. Following by faith. Allowing God to lead them and guide them into the land that He promised to them! And so it is with us. We live by faith and follow Christ by faith. Ours is a spiritual warfare fought on our knees with all the resources given to us in Christ.

Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?

Got any mountains you can't tunnel through?

God specializes in things thought impossible;

He'll do what no other friend can do.

Donald K. Campbell No Time For Neutrality