

Crossing the Jordan
Joshua 3:1-17; 4:10b-18

This is one Biblical scene we have absolutely no trouble visualizing – an impassable river. After all, the Mississippi was at flood stage for about half of this year, longer than any time since the epic flood of 1927, bringing swarms of biting buffalo gnats, keeping many people at Eagle Lake from having access to their homes, and preventing many farmers from planting any crops at all. The idea of trying to cross such a raging torrent without a bridge would simply be unthinkable.

According to Chapter 3 and verse 15, that's the same sort of problem that the Israelites faced, for God had led them to the banks of the Jordan precisely when it was at flood stage. Now, we've all heard, "Turn around, don't drown," right? We've been told that it only takes 6 inches of water in a flash flood for you to lose your footing, and that 12 inches can cause a car to float. Well, we don't know exactly where the people were preparing to cross the Jordan, but wherever it was, at that time of the year the river could have been as much as a mile across, and 3 to 10 feet deep.

And they couldn't just call out the Cajun Navy. There were no boats available for hundreds of thousands of people, not to mention all their baggage and all their livestock. And in such a semi-arid region, there wouldn't be enough wood anywhere close by to construct a sufficient flotilla. No, they would have to ford this river, crossing it on foot, and that just couldn't be done. Oh, and just to make sure they understood how difficult this would be, verse 2 says that God gave them three days in camp on the banks of the river, three days to look at all that water going by and think about this impossible situation.

So, how about us and the impossible situations we face? Sure, the Mississippi is finally back within its banks, but that doesn't mean the problems it has caused are over. There were over a half million acres just in Mississippi that were under water, and hundreds of homes were damaged. And insurance won't come close to covering all of the losses – after all, many farmers have to pay rent, regardless of whether they make a crop or not. Nationwide, this year's flooding may end up costing \$2 billion – and now hurricane season is just getting started.

And what about the impossible situations in your personal life? What's your Jordan River? Maybe, like those Delta farmers, you've got big financial problems. Maybe you're trying to find a job or having difficulty making ends meet. Maybe you're suffering from chronic illness or a debilitating injury. Maybe you're just tired out from giving care to others. Maybe you're having a hard time kicking a bad habit or overcoming an addiction. Maybe you're struggling with a difficult relationship, having trouble getting along with your spouse or children. Maybe loneliness has hit you hard, because your loved ones are far away. Or maybe you're wrestling with the grief that comes from knowing they'll never come back. In one way or another, we all have things in our lives that we just can't do anything about, problems that we just can't solve on our own. We all have our own Jordan Rivers to cross.

Okay, so what did God tell those Israelites to do? Nothing practical, nothing that made sense. He didn't tell them to build a pontoon bridge or string up a rope that they could use to ferry their belongings across. He didn't even tell them to wait until the water went down, or move to another point on the river bank where it would be easier to cross. No, God told the people to sit right there and engage in some sort of purification ritual, to sanctify or consecrate themselves in much the same way that they had done when God came down on Mount Sinai to give them the 10 commandments, some 40 years earlier. What good would that do?

But that wasn't the strangest thing. In chapter 3 verse 3, God told all the people to follow the priests who were carrying the ark of God, the gold-plated wooden box that acted as a reminder of God's presence with His people. And in verse 8, he told the priests to carry the ark to the very edge of the river, close enough for them to get their feet wet. But it's not like all of them could get into that little wooden box and float across the river. So, how could any of this possibly be of any real help?

Maybe that's where you find yourself today. Maybe, as you look at your own Jordan River, God is asking you to do something that just doesn't make sense, something that can't seem to do any real good. Maybe God is calling you to deal with that impossible relationship not by trying to get your own way, but by forgiving those who have hurt you, humbling yourself to put other people's needs first. Maybe, in spite of your financial problems, God is calling you to engage in the spiritual discipline of tithing so that you can support one of our missionaries or church planters, or help a Brazilian family get a cistern. Maybe God is calling you to handle your way-too-long to-do list not by staying busy all the time but by keeping the Sabbath, setting aside a whole day each week to enjoy God's presence and to be with God's people. Maybe God is calling you pray for those who are sick or hurting or lonely – perhaps even giving up something as important as eating in order to spend more time in prayer. Maybe instead of doing what makes sense to you, or what feels right to you, God is calling you to be faithful, trusting Him whether you can feel His presence or not.

But the good news that we find in this story is that if many of our problems are impossible for us, and if many of God's commands seem to be irrational to us, it's nothing that we do that will ultimately bring about our salvation. And that's precisely the truth to which God's rather strange commands point. For why did God command His people to sanctify themselves? Because, just as He had done at Mount Sinai, God was going to show up. And since the ark of the covenant signified the very presence of the Lord, God was thus telling His priests that He Himself was going to the very edge of the river, that He was about to lead His people through that impossible barrier.

And that's exactly what God did. Just as He had parted the waters of the Red Sea so that His people could leave their slavery in Egypt, God dried up the waters of the Jordan so that His people could enter into the inheritance He had promised to give them. In other words, God chose to solve His people's impossible problem with an even more impossible solution – one that He Himself personally provided, one that needed no help from any of them. God simply asked His people to trust Him, to believe in the certainty of His salvation, and then stand back and watch as He did the rest.

And that's still the case for us today. For if the bad news is that we cannot cleanse ourselves from sin, if there's no way we can knit our broken lives back together, if there's nothing we can do to solve so many of the impossible problems that we face, the good news is that there's nothing we have to do. For the good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has already accomplished everything necessary for the forgiveness and the cleansing of all our sins. The good news is that Jesus fills all His people with His Holy Spirit, thus burning away from within us everything that is out of accord with God's will, bringing light and truth even to the darkest corners of our lives, applying the love of God to our deepest hurts. And the good news is that there's nothing we need to do to make any of this happen – like God's people by the Jordan River, we just need to stand back and trust Jesus to save us, to trust Jesus to do the impossible.

But that's not to say that, once we have been saved, Christians are called to be idlers. No, as we see in today's passage, once God has taken care of the impossible, He still calls us to do the possible. In fact, you could say that in accomplishing this incredible miracle for them, God was in fact preparing His people for greater service in the days to come.

That was certainly the case with Joshua. In chapter 3 and verse 7, God specifically told him that his leadership and faithfulness on the banks of the Jordan would begin to build him up in the eyes of his people. And as we see in chapter 4 and verse 14, that did in fact happen – after crossing the river, the people respected Joshua the same way they had respected Moses. God thus used this miracle to provide a new leader for His people.

But what exactly had Joshua done? Simply put, he had been faithful to God, transmitting God's commands to the people, no matter how pointless and nonsensical those orders may have seemed to be. In doing this, Joshua thus demonstrated his trust in God, his certainty that God would in fact show up and accomplish the impossible, doing what God had said He would do. And that kind of faithfulness continues to be a hallmark of effective Christian leadership today.

But the miracle at the Jordan wasn't just a demonstration that God had indeed picked Joshua to lead His people. No, as chapter 3 verse 10 says, it was a sign to all the people that God Himself would go with them into the Promised Land. For as God had made it possible for His people to cross the river, God was thus promising that He would drive out from before them all those who were living in the land at that time. Seeing how God made a way for His people through river thus increased their confidence that God would continue to protect them and provide for them in the future.

And confident they were. We see in chapter 4 verses 12 and 13 that the warriors from the tribes who had already received their land on the east side of the Jordan were nevertheless willing to cross over the river with their kinsmen. Under the leadership of Joshua and with the certainty of God's presence among them, they thus put themselves in harm's way to help the rest of God's people receive the promise He had made to them.

And isn't that the same thing that God calls us to do? For He has already solved our greatest problem, conquering sin and death through the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God has given all who trust in Christ the reality of a transformed life today, as well as the hope of the resurrection into an even greater life to come. In short, Christ has already won the greatest victory we could possibly need.

So, let's take another look at some of those impossible situations in our lives – the pain, the sickness, the addictions, the broken relationships, the grief. Are any of those things impossible for the God Who can stop up a raging river? Is anything too hard for a God Who can raise the dead?

So, with the confidence of children of God, knowing that He has already won the greatest victory for us, let's follow Him across the Jordan, being faithful in whatever He calls us to do, whether it makes sense to us or not. Let's seek His face in prayer and let's seek His will in His Word. Maybe he's just calling us to trust Him to take care of a particular problem. Or maybe he's calling us to be part of the solution somehow – to look for another job, or to get a second opinion on a medical issue, or to seek godly counsel from our ruling elders. But no matter what happens we can be sure of this: God is willing and able to do everything that is in accordance with His will, to do us good and to bring Him glory. Whatever your Jordan River may be, God can get you across it. So, let's trust His promises and follow Him today.