

Receiving Your Inheritance

Messages from the Book of Joshua

Message 4

Mobilizing the People

Joshua 3:1-4:24

(Read 3:1-4:9)

Introduction

What do you do when you are facing a difficult task? Maybe it's a tough programming assignment, or a big paper. Maybe it's admitting a mistake or breaking up with your girlfriend. Or maybe it's doing the laundry! I'll tell you what I do – I procrastinate. It's not that I consciously plan to put off the unpleasant chore – procrastination comes naturally when I really don't want to do something. I bet you are the same. Most of us tend to put off unpleasant jobs. And it's no less true when it comes to obeying God. Perhaps you are convinced God wants you to apologize for an offense against someone. Maybe God is speaking to you to stop watching so much TV, or some particular raunchy shows. Perhaps God is urging you to speak up in class and defend a biblical position, against what the text and teacher have been presenting. However God may be urging you to obey Him, often we drag our feet. We put it off until tomorrow, we make excuses, we hope for a way out, until eventually we have to face the fact that we actually have been disobedient.

Acting Courageously

Joshua and the people of Israel present us here with an admirable example of obedience to God. At first reading it may not seem so special, but think about what they set out to do here. They are camped on the east bank of the Jordan river. The next step in their journey to the home God has promised them is to cross the river. Now ordinarily the Jordan River is three to ten feet deep – not easy to cross, but not impossible for an army. But they are planning to take *everybody* across: women, children, and animals as well as the armed men. Furthermore, it is springtime, and the Jordan is flooded. The water is considerably deeper and more turbulent than it is the rest of the year. It would be a challenge for anyone, and virtually impossible for a whole nation to cross.

We might have expected Joshua to wait until he could figure out some plan to get everyone over. But no. He commanded the people just to get up and head toward the river. And what is remarkable is that they just obeyed. No arguments, no complaints, no demanding an explanation. They just did it. Furthermore, we read that Joshua rose early in the morning and got the whole thing under way. No fooling around. No looking for a sign. No getting everything just right. When the time came to move, they *moved!* What's more, Joshua commanded the people to purify themselves to enter the land God had promised them. Again there was no objection or resistance. They just did it.

What makes all this so remarkable is that no one could see any way to cross the river. It's almost eerie that they made no objection. It seems almost ridiculous that they got ready to cross a river that clearly was impassible. What's going on here? How are all these people engaging upon such a foolish expedition? What would motivate them? Only faith. Obviously they are trusting God to get them across somehow. And if God is trustworthy, they don't need to know the details. Maybe there is a bridge they had not discovered. Maybe there is a hidden ford. Who knows? But who cares? If there is faith, you don't need to know the details.

This is reminiscent of another story about a man who set out on a difficult and perplexing task. God had promised Abraham a son, and 25 years later Isaac was born. Then came the day when God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. What a blow! Any father would practically break down in despair at such a prospect, but it was worse for Abraham. Isaac was his only son with Sarah, and he was the son who

would receive God's special promises. This command was a total catastrophe. Nevertheless, Abraham obeyed God. The New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that as Abraham wrestled with this grisly task he concluded that he could trust God to keep His promise *somehow*, even though it appeared to be the end of all Abraham's hopes. And when you read the story, you find that Abraham got up early to obey God.

Abraham and Joshua were characterized by zeal to obey God. They did not reluctantly, or slowly obey – they got up early to do God's will, even when it was difficult. How were they able to do this? They had faith. They trusted God to work it all out. Abraham did not know how he would have a son, and Joshua did not know how he would cross the river, but they knew God did, and that was enough. Because of their faith they were able to act courageously.

How about you? Do you get up early to obey God? Do you trust that He will accomplish His will, even when you don't have all the details? Or do you fool around and delay, waiting to see how it will all turn out? We need to be more like Joshua and the Israelites, willing to trust God, even when we can't see all the details.

The Presence of God

Perhaps the most prominent theme of this passage is the presence of God. Back in chapter one God promised Joshua that he would go with him, that He would never leave Joshua or forsake him. God fulfilled that promise first in speaking to Joshua. It's interesting to note that God did not speak at first. Joshua knew what the first steps were. He got the people ready and they began moving toward the river. But as Joshua needed further instruction, God was right there to guide him. In chapter 3, verses 7 to 8 God gave initial instructions about who should lead the way across the Jordan. In chapter 4 God gave further instructions regarding setting up a memorial of this great event for future generations. And at the end, God told Joshua how to conclude the expedition. What more could you ask? God told Joshua how to start, how to proceed, and how to finish the project. But God said nothing until Joshua obeyed what he knew at the beginning.

God was present, just as He had promised, but Joshua did not experience that presence until he began to obey. It takes faith to follow God. Some people refuse to live by faith. They want God to show them everything clearly before they will do anything. At its root, this is a refusal to trust God. It's as if you are saying, "I'm not sure God will come through for me. I will wait and see." You see, it is essentially calling God untrustworthy, or a liar. You cannot follow God that way. You have to trust God to tell you the truth and stand by it. And if you do, you will obey Him, even when you only know the next step. *Then* you will experience God's presence and guidance.

The most prominent aspect of God's presence in this passage is the ark of the covenant. This was the gold-covered box with two angels on it which was God's earthly home. Now of course God is present everywhere, and He certainly was not locked up in some little box carried by a few men. But God promised to be present in some special way on the ark of the covenant. If you go back to the books of Exodus and Leviticus, you will find minute instructions on the construction and care of this piece of furniture. It was made of precious wood and covered all over with gold, to symbolize the beauty, purity, and infinite worth of God. No man was allowed ever to see it. Only the Levites were allowed to carry it, and they used special poles so they might not touch the box itself. All this was designed to convey the awesome glory and holiness of God. The ark of the covenant functioned as a tangible, visible sign of the invisible God. As such, it played a vital role in the life of Israel.

The necessity of physical signs.

We look for signs

God has given us signs of His presence: bread and wine.

3rd: The miracle.

The Officers Lead

Officers (civil)

Priests (ecclesiastical)

Marks of a church: word, sacrament, discipline

Conclusion

God is present in His church.

Hear His word.

See His signs.

Obey courageously.

Live by faith.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
February 5, 2002