

Walking into Wonders – Joshua 3:1-17

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I. INTRODUCTION

How well do you handle taking uncomfortable steps of faith and then waiting patiently for God to show up? Has God ever asked you to do something that seems illogical from a human standpoint and is viewed as such by other people around you? Has he ever asked you to do something that will only be possible if he shows up and does a powerful work within you or for you? Well today, as we move forward in our study of Joshua, we're going to see what happened when a group of weak, imperfect people decided to take some of those uncomfortable steps of faith and follow some rather strange instructions God had given them. And we're going to see how in doing so, they walked into one of the most awesome displays of God's power over his creation and learned a powerful lesson of how fully engaged and active God is in the lives of those who will simply trust and obey him. Turn with me in your Bibles, if you would, to Joshua, chapter 3. I've called today's message: "Walking into Wonders."

II. CONTEXT: MOVEMENT FROM SHITTIM TO THE EDGE OF THE JORDAN (v. 1)

By way of context, we're continuing on in the historical account of how the nation of Israel finally entered the Promised Land after 40 years of God's discipline in the wilderness for their refusal to trust him. And this was in spite of all the incredible ways God had displayed his great power and glory by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt; opening up a path through the Red Sea; guiding them with a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night; revealing his awesome power and majesty and character at Mount Horeb as he gave the 10 commandments and entered into a covenant with them; and miraculously providing them with food and water as they traveled through a barren wilderness...to name just a few of the ways God had demonstrated his great power and commitment to them. Yet despite all of these unmistakable displays of God's glory and power, they refused to trust him and forfeited the rest he wanted to give them in the Promised Land.

But now, after 40 years, the discipline was complete, the lesson had hopefully been learned, and God was now calling his servant, Joshua, to lead his people with strength and great courage into the Promised Land. God had told Joshua that he would only be able to do this as he lived and breathed God's Word and followed it completely in his life, trusting God and his Word and showing that trust by moving forward in bold and courageous action. Joshua had listened to and believed this message from God and had announced to the Israelites that within 3 days they would be crossing the Jordan River to begin taking the Promised Land. He also, at the same time, had sent 2 spies to scope out their first target, the city of Jericho. In our last 2 messages we journeyed with those spies on their adventure into Jericho and their interaction with the prostitute Rahab, who decided to join up with the one true God and received a promise of protection from his coming judgment on the city of Jericho.

Now as we move into chapter 3 today, we return to the morning after Joshua had just sent the spies out from the town of Shittim where the Israelites were camping. Let's pick up the events in verse 1:

1 Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and he and all the sons of Israel set out from Shittim and came to the Jordan, and they lodged there before they crossed.

So during the time the spies were on their mission to the city of Jericho, Joshua moved the Israelites from Shittim to the edge of the Jordan River, a journey of around 6 miles. There at the edge of the Jordan the Israelites camped until the spies returned on the 3rd day after hiding out in the hills to avoid the king of Jericho's men. And I imagine the king's men must have had a real eye-opener when they arrived at the fords of the Jordan River and saw the multitude of Israelites camping on the other side in preparation for crossing. My guess is they rushed back to the king to sound the warning of an impending invasion!

III. INSTRUCTIONS TO THE PEOPLE: CONSECRATE YOURSELVES FOR THE LORD'S WONDERS AND PREPARE TO FOLLOW (vs. 2-5)

All of these events are happening within the 3-day period Joshua had announced back in chapter 1 as the time frame remaining before they would cross the river into the Promised Land. Then verse 2 of chapter 3 picks up at the end of the 3

days, after the spies have returned and the crossing of the river is scheduled to take place the next morning. Let's read verses 2 through 5, where the officers and Joshua give final instructions to the people in preparation for crossing:

2 At the end of three days the officers went through the midst of the camp; 3 and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God with the Levitical priests carrying it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. 4 "However, there shall be between you and it a distance of about 2,000 cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you shall go, for you have not passed this way before." 5 Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."

Here in these verses we see the officers providing the people some very specific instructions to follow as they prepare to cross the Jordan River. They are NOT to just start heading out toward the river by any path they choose as soon as they're ready in the morning, but instead are to wait until they actually see the ark of the covenant being carried by the priests. When that happens, THEN they can start moving and their movement should follow the path set by those carrying the ark. Additionally, they should stay a little over half a mile behind the ark so all the people and tribes can clearly see the path to take and follow in an organized fashion. You can imagine that if all the tribes were just crowding around the ark, only a small number of people would actually be able to see the ark and the result would be complete chaos and confusion, with people spread out all over the place wondering which way to go.

This reminds us that God is a God of order and if we want to follow him, we need to have a clear line of sight so that we can keep our eyes on him and stay on the path he sets rather than wandering around in confusion. The officers told the people that keeping a clear line of sight was important because they had not passed this way before, but there was One who had and that was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe! This is such an important truth in our lives as well. We so easily try to chart our own course in life based on our very limited perspectives and desires which are often completely out of line with God's purposes in our lives. We run ahead. We head down rabbit trails that lead to dead ends. We get stuck in the mud.

But God teaches us instead to be patient, to keep our eyes on him, to seek his guidance and direction continually, and to follow the lead of the One who knows it all and has always passed this way before! And if we want to do this effectively, we need a clear line of sight to God at all times, a clear understanding of who he is and his purposes for us as revealed in his Word. We need eyes that are fixed on him and continually seeking his guidance and direction. We need hearts that are committed to following rather than trying to lead based on our very limited knowledge and human wisdom.

Well, after the officers gave these instructions to the people, Joshua told the people to consecrate themselves because tomorrow the Lord would do wonders among them. The Hebrew word translated, “wonders,” here, describes actions taken by God *“that are beyond the bounds of human powers or expectations”* (Vines). It’s the same word used to describe the 10 miraculous plagues God brought on Egypt to rescue his people from slavery. Wonders are also what the people of Israel praised the Lord for after the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army. At that time, as recorded in Exodus 15, verse 11, the Israelites sang with joy: ***“Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?”*** ... rhetorical questions with the obvious answer being NO other god, and NO ONE period, is like the one true God and able to work wonders like these! And now, here on the edge of the Jordan, Joshua was telling the people that tomorrow, God was about to work more of these awesome wonders. What a sense of anticipation and excitement that must have created!

Well, in order to prepare themselves for these wonders the Lord was about to perform, the people were instructed by Joshua to consecrate themselves. This idea of consecration involved preparing their hearts and minds and bodies to be set apart for God and in step with his purposes. Consecration in the Old Testament involved washing themselves and their clothes and abstaining from activities that God had designated as unclean. It also involved ensuring that sin was dealt with and that people were keeping God’s laws and practicing them. Consecration involved being set apart as God’s people and living life in a way that reflected submission to God and his revealed Word. These ideas are expressed well in Leviticus 20, verses 7 through 8, where God says:

7 “You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. 8 You shall keep My statutes and practice them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”

Consecration for both the Israelites and us involves dealing with any sin in our lives that’s hindering our relationship with God. And it also involves preparing our hearts to be attentive and submissive to God and his purposes and fixing our eyes on God with reverence and awe and a desiring of his will in our lives. These are some of the key ideas involved in consecration.

So often I think we are passive and unconcerned about sinful attitudes and practices that have taken root in our lives and yet we still expect unhindered fellowship with God and access to his powerful working in our lives. Even though we know about these sin issues and are refusing to work on them with God, we wonder why we seem to be getting nowhere in our relationship with God and in being fruitful and effective in him. Often I’ve even heard people admit they have unresolved sin issues in their lives, but they’re just not willing to deal with them right now and let God get to work on them. But make no mistake: unresolved sin and ungodly attitudes in our lives profoundly affect our fellowship with God and actually cause us to be unfruitful and ineffective in him.

Later in Joshua, we’ll see how unresolved sin affected the nation of Israel’s effectiveness in battle. In fact, I’ll give you a quick preview from Joshua chapter 7, verse 13. In that passage someone had disobeyed God’s command and taken things for themselves that God had specifically commanded them not to take. Listen to what God says about how that sin was affecting Israel’s relationship with him and what the remedy was:

“Rise up! Consecrate the people and say, “Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, for thus the Lord, the God of Israel, has said, ‘There are things under the ban in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you have removed the things under the ban from your midst.’”

There was sin in the camp and God would not be making them effective and fighting their battles until it was removed and dealt with! That was a dangerous place to be. People had lost their lives because of it.

Don't ever let sin remain and fester in your life. Deal with it wherever and whenever it pops up and don't ever put it off or tell the Lord you're not ready to deal with it yet. There's no time better than the present. Consecrate yourself. Deal with sin by owning it, confessing it to God, making plans to change, and asking him to help you change. Don't ever let anything hinder your fellowship with God and your effectiveness in him! Don't ever be in a place where you can't stand against your enemies because sin has left you dead in the water.

This also applies to us as a church body. If we're out of step with God and his Word...if there's disunity and division...if there's false teaching...if there's unaddressed immorality or greed or corruption in leadership or members...then we need to deal with these things in a godly way if we want to be fully effective and fruitful as the body of Christ.

IV. INSTRUCTIONS TO THE PRIESTS: TAKE UP THE ARK AND GO AHEAD OF THE PEOPLE (v. 6)

Well, after instructing the people to consecrate themselves in preparation for the wonders the Lord was about to perform, the next morning Joshua told the priests it was time to take action and start heading for the river. Let's pick up in verse 6:

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

Joshua's instructions were simple and the priests didn't delay or argue. They picked up the ark, started walking and got out ahead of the people so they could follow.

V. THE LORD SPEAKS TO JOSHUA: TODAY I WILL SHOW THE PEOPLE I AM WITH YOU; TELL THE PRIESTS TO STAND STILL IN THE JORDAN (vs. 7-8)

At this point the Lord spoke directly to Joshua again, giving him insight into what he was going to accomplish through the wonders he was about to perform and providing additional instructions for the priests carrying the ark. Let's read verses 7 and 8:

7 Now the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you. 8 "You shall, moreover, command the priests who are carrying the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'"

The Lord told Joshua that one of the purposes of the wonders he was about to perform in the sight of all Israel, was to exalt Joshua as his appointed leader of the Israelites, showing the people that just as he had been with Moses, he would also be with Joshua. The purpose was not to inflate Joshua's self-concept and ego, but instead to unmistakably show that Joshua was God's chosen man to lead his people into the Promised Land and that God was fully supporting and directing him.

Additionally, the Lord told Joshua some rather unusual instructions to pass along to the priests carrying the ark. Rather than just walking to the edge of the Jordan River and waiting on the edge, they were actually supposed to wade into the water and then stand there waiting. Now the Jordan River at this time of the year was at flood stage and overflowing its banks, as we learn a little further down in verse 15. The text tells us that the time of year was "the days of harvest," which in the Jordan Valley is March or April.

Since the river was at flood stage, this means the river would have been much more challenging to cross than at other times of the year. The river's normal depth is from 3 to 10 feet and has a width of around 90 to 100 feet (*ESV Study Bible*), but at flood stage it would have been considerably wider and deeper. Yet Joshua tells the priests to go ahead and walk on into the water and then stand there and wait. Once again we see that uncomfortable, obedient steps of faith were the precursor to the wonders God was about to perform!

VI. JOSHUA'S SPEAKS GOD'S WORDS TO ISRAEL PRIOR TO CROSSING: GET READY FOR GOD'S WONDERS PROVING HE IS WITH YOU AND WILL GIVE YOU THE PROMISED LAND (vs. 9-13)

Well, after God finishes talking with Joshua, Joshua begins speaking to the people about what's God's about to do and what it will demonstrate to them. Let's read verses 9 through 13:

9 Then Joshua said to the sons of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God." 10 Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will assuredly dispossess from before you the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Hivite, the Perizzite, the Girgashite, the Amorite, and the Jebusite. 11 "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over ahead of you into the Jordan. 12 "Now then, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man for each tribe. 13 "It shall come about when the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan will be cut off, and the waters which are flowing down from above will stand in one heap."

Joshua opens his speech with an interesting statement: **"Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God."** In other words, what I'm about to say is directly from God! You might want to pay attention! Joshua then begins his speech by telling the people exactly what they should learn and take away from what God is about to do. And rather than assuming they'll come to the correct conclusions, Joshua "cuts to the chase" and provides them with the conclusions God wants them to arrive at, which are twofold. In the wonders God was about to perform, the people would be able to know two things with certainty:

- 1) The living God is among them;
- 2) He will certainly dispossess from before the Israelites all the people groups currently living in the Promised Land.

These are the truths God wanted them to learn from what he was about to do! Wouldn't it be great if God always told us exactly what he wants us to learn from the experiences we go through in life?! Well, in this case, he made it completely clear. The living God...AKA, the one true God who alone is alive and real and powerful and works wonders was dwelling with them and going with them into the upcoming battles. The nations currently living in the Promised Land were deluding themselves by serving dead idols they had created with their own hands and minds, but the Israelites in contrast were connected with the one true, living God, the Creator, the Sustainer of the universe, who was fully committed to fighting their battles as they trusted in him and walked in his ways! Victory was

certain. These were the truths the people needed to take away from the wonders they were about to witness.

Now in verse 11, we notice that Joshua must have been giving this speech as the priests were in the process of carrying the ark toward the river. He says, look and see, ***“the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over ahead of you into the Jordan.”*** Interestingly, Joshua uses that title “Lord of all the earth,” twice in these verses. Previously the officers had talked about the ark as the “ark of the covenant of the Lord your God.” Now Joshua designates it twice as the “ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth.” In other words, the living God is not just the Lord of the Israelites, he’s the Lord of all the earth. He created it all and it all belongs to him. And he’s about to show his power and control over it all as the priests carrying his ark step into the water in obedience to his instructions.

Then, in verse 12, Joshua instructs the people to select one man from each of the 12 tribes. These men will play an important role in chapter 4 after the people cross the river. Joshua then proceeds to tell the people ahead of time exactly what miracles God is going to perform. This shows them that Joshua is in direct communication with God as his appointed leader since he knew ahead of time what was going to happen. Joshua tells them that when the priests carrying the ark step into the water and stand still there, then the Lord will cut off the waters of the Jordan River upstream and cause them to stand in one heap. Not only would God cut off the flow of the river, he would also pile the waters up in one heap instead of allowing the waters to do what they would normally do when dammed up: flooding the entire area all around.

This was a pretty dramatic prediction to make and there must have been some long moments of tense drama as they waited to see if all these things would really happen. This is especially true since we’re told in verse 16 that the waters were cut off and stacked up in a heap around ***18 miles upstream*** near the city of Adam. This means that they must have had to wait in the water quite some time for the remaining water to flow 18 miles downstream. Keep this in mind the next time you find yourself waiting on God!

VII. WALKING INTO WONDERS: THE JORDAN CROSSING (vs. 14-17)

Well, let's read our final verses for today, verses 14 through 17, and see how God's wonders unfolded as his people took steps of faith in obedience to his commands and instructions:

14 So when the people set out from their tents to cross the Jordan with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant before the people, 15 and when those who carried the ark came into the Jordan, and the feet of the priests carrying the ark were dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks all the days of harvest), 16 the waters which were flowing down from above stood and rose up in one heap, a great distance away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan; and those which were flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. So the people crossed opposite Jericho. 17 And the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan while all Israel crossed on dry ground, until all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan.

Wow! We truly serve the God of wonders who not only created the universe, upholds and sustains it, but can also modify its ordinary operation in any way he pleases to accomplish his purposes and glorify his name! This is the God we have bold and confident access to through Jesus Christ. ***“Let us then with confidence approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”*** (Hebrews 4:16). Amen?!

Well, I want you to notice that God's wonders did not take place until God's people took action and obeyed his instructions. The waters were only cut off WHEN the people had set out from their tents following the priests carrying the ark of the covenant AND WHEN the priests had stepped into the water as instructed and stood still in it. So often I think we pray and then sit around waiting for God to perform a miracle without any participation from us. But the way God usually works is he shows us what needs to be done or where we need to go, and then he provides the power and strength we need as we start walking in faith in the direction he's told us to go. We walk into the wonders God's going to perform as we take steps of faith trusting he's going to show up and work through us as we follow his lead. And those steps we take are often

uncomfortable, may be ridiculed or scoffed at by other people, may require some awkward moments of waiting for God to perform his work, and will often require persistent, enduring, repeated efforts before we see results. And one more thing: the results will not always be what we expect because God works in mysterious ways that are often completely different than what our human minds expect!

Well, God performed at least 3 miracles here as his people obeyed his instructions and walked in faith: 1) He stopped the flow of water near the city of Adam; 2) he caused the water to stand up in one heap rather than flooding the city; and 3) he dried out the ground so the priests holding the ark of the covenant could stand firm and the whole nation of Israel could cross the river safely and easily. Is anything too difficult for our God?! Joshua had told the people what God would do ahead of time and God did it exactly as predicted. This caused the people to recognize that God was with Joshua as he had been with Moses, and the people were given unmistakable evidence that the living God was truly with them and would give them certain victory over the nations living in the Promised Land as they trusted him and walked in his ways!

Think about this: The Lord stopped the flow of water that was endlessly flowing down to the Dead Sea and he did it next to the city named after the man through whom sin entered the world: Adam. Then the Lord provided a safe way across that river flowing to death. This sounds a lot like what he does for all those who will repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation!

VIII. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

So as we wrap up today, I think we can summarize the key points of this passage this way:

As God prepared his people to enter his rest in the Promised Land, he called them to keep their eyes on him, follow his instructions exactly, and show their faith in him by taking uncomfortable action that didn't make sense from a human standpoint; And as they obeyed this calling they experienced a stunning display of God's power over all things that provided them safe passage and gave them confidence that the living God was with them and with their leader, Joshua, and would give them certain victory over all the nations currently living in the Promised Land.

We've already identified several applications to our lives today as we've moved through this message. We've seen that we need to resist running ahead of God and charting our own course in life, but instead be patient, keep our eyes on him, seek his guidance and direction continually, and learn to follow the lead of the One who knows it all and has always passed this way before! To do this effectively, we need a clear line of sight to God at all times which is only found through a clear understanding of who he is and his purposes for us as revealed in his Word. This means diligent and regular prayer, study and meditation on God's Word and a willingness to not only know it, but also to put it into practice by the power of the Spirit within us. How's that going for you today?

Additionally, we talked about the importance of consecration, which involves dealing with any sin in our lives that's hindering our relationship with God, preparing our hearts to be attentive and submissive to God and his purposes, and learning to keep our eyes on God, desiring his will above all else in our lives. Is your life consecrated to God and his purposes today and are you willing to let him into all areas of your life? Don't ever let sin remain and fester in your life. Deal with it wherever and whenever it pops up and don't ever put it off or tell the Lord you're not ready to deal with it yet. Own it, confess it to God, ask for forgiveness from God and others, make a plan for change, and ask God to help you change. And keep asking! Don't ever let anything hinder your fellowship with God and your effectiveness in him! Don't ever be in a place where you can't stand against your enemies because sin has left you defenseless.

And finally, we learned that God works wonders within and through people who are willing to take obedient steps of faith, trusting that he'll provide the strength, power and wisdom needed as they go. God usually shows us what needs to be done or where we need to go, and then provides the power and strength we need as we start walking in faith in the direction he's told us to go. We walk into the wonders God's going to perform as we take obedient steps of faith trusting God is going to show up and work through us as we follow his lead.

Does this mean God's going to part the waters of Catherine Creek for you if you ask? Or should you expect him to physically move Mount Emily so you don't have to climb over it? He certainly could do either of those things if he chose to! We need to remember that this miracle at the Jordan River was a key event in God's plan of redemption and his revelation of who he is, how he cares for his people,

and how his power has no limits. As such, we shouldn't expect these types of miracles to occur every day in our lives. However, God still works awesome miracles and he daily provides those who will trust him and step out in faith the power to do things they could never otherwise do apart from him. Truly nothing is impossible with God and when we begin following him and expecting him to show up, God only knows the wonders he will perform in and through us for his glory! But let's never forget that we need patience and persistence in this process and a willingness to fail from time to time and accept different results than we may be expecting.

How often are you stepping out in faith in your life? Are you willing to do things that are uncomfortable and put you at risk when God ask you to? If you want to learn to walk by his Spirit and be used by him in powerful ways for his glory, then start walking in the direction he's leading even it seems scary. And if you fail as we all sometime do, try, try again. As someone has said, we often learn more from our failures than from our successes! Be persistent and patient and trust the results to God. Our God is a worker of awesome wonders and truly nothing is too difficult for him. Let's not put him in any boxes or limit the possibilities of what he can accomplish as we walk in obedience to his Word, surrender to his purposes, and allow him to lead in all things.

I want to close today with a beautiful and powerful passage from Jeremiah, chapter 10, that contrasts the living God with the many false idols and gods the world has created and constantly offers as substitutes for the real thing. Beginning in verse 6 of Jeremiah, chapter 10, we read this:

6 There is none like You, O Lord; You are great, and great is Your name in might. 7 Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? Indeed it is Your due! For among all the wise men of the nations And in all their kingdoms, There is none like You. 8 But they are altogether stupid and foolish In their discipline of delusion — their idol is wood! 9 Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, And gold from Uphaz, The work of a craftsman and of the hands of a goldsmith; Violet and purple are their clothing; They are all the work of skilled men. 10 But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, And the nations cannot endure His indignation. 11 Thus you shall say to them, "The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from

under the heavens." 12 It is He who made the earth by His power, Who established the world by His wisdom; And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. 13 When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, And He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, And brings out the wind from His storehouses.

This, my friends, is the living God we serve and to whom we have bold and confident access through faith in Jesus Christ! Let's walk boldly in faith into the wonders he has for each of us!