

The Pump-Priming Principle

Joshua 3:1-5

For the first two years of my life, my family lived on a pecan farm in Mobile County, Alabama. Even after we moved into the city of Mobile, our family would often drive a few miles out into the country to take care of the pecan trees. We were out there almost every weekend in the fall, picking up pecans. There were only a barn, an equipment shed and, of course, the house. I was fascinated by that house! I enjoyed hearing Dad tell of the work he did around that house to modernize it. As far back as I can remember, there has always been running water in the house, but it had not always been so. For years and years, the water for the house was supplied by an old, hand-operated pump just off the back porch.

To this day I remember the groans from the pump which filled the air whenever someone worked the handle up and down. I can remember the taste and the icy coldness of the water that came up out of that pump. And I remember Dad showing me how to work the pump by first pouring a little water in at the top to “prime” the pump, so it would pull the water up from the well below.

A few times I would come back to the house after picking up pecans in the orchards, and imagining myself to be thirsty, I would head for the pump, rather than go inside to the faucet. I think I just wanted to watch the crystal-clear water spurting out and splashing into the bucket! A few times in my impatience I would forget to prime the pump, and worked that handled up and down until it seemed that my arm would fall off, but no water came out. Once I remembered what it took to get the pump working, I always wondered why it had to be that way. Why couldn't the pump be like the water faucet inside the house, ready to dispense water the moment I chose? It was puzzling, but entralling just the same.

Now that I am older, and can look back on that childhood fascination with priming the pump, I am aware that there was a principle which can be applied to nearly all things in our lives. We could call it “The Pump-Priming Principle.” It's been around for a long time, though it may have been called by different names. It is that principle of the Christ-life which says that ordinarily, great things do not just happen to us. Just as the water pump had to be primed before it would pump water, we must be prepared—or primed, if you will—before we can be receptive to the things God is about to do among us.

I don't know what he would have called it, but Joshua recognized this principle of preparing for what God was going to do among the Hebrews, as He victoriously led them into the land of Canaan. So the Lord God told them, just as they were standing on the very brinks of the Jordan River, "*Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you*" (3:5).

It wasn't the first time, either. Just before God blessed Jacob, changing his name to Israel, the Lord called on him to consecrate himself. Genesis 35:2 records how Jacob then instructed his entire household to put away their foreign gods, purify themselves and change their clothes in preparation for the wondrous things God was about to do for them. When God was about to reveal Himself at Mount Sinai to give the Law to Moses, He commanded the people to consecrate themselves (Exodus 19:10-15).

In our day, if *we* are going to prime our pumps in preparation for what God is going to do among *us*, then we must dip down into the same bucket the Hebrews did. The times may have changed since then, but the way to prepare for God's wonders in our lives has remained exactly the same: "*Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.*" By carefully examining the first five verses of Joshua 3, we can see that we can prime the pump of consecration before God by answering three questions.

1 Am I willing to surrender to the power of God? (vv. 1-2)

Now that Joshua had received the faith-filled, daring report of the two spies, he was ready to go into action. Verse one tells us that early the next morning, the people traveled from Shittim, where they had been encamped for some while, to the eastern banks of the Jordan River, a distance of about seven miles. Now get this: then it was time to *wait some more!* They camped there near the river for three more days before they did anything else at all. Why didn't they just go ahead and cross the river *then?*

Picture this in your mind: verse 15 of this chapter tells us that the Jordan River was overflowing its banks, because it is in the flood stage all during the harvest season. There were no bridges for the Hebrews to use, and the fords where the river would normally be crossed were flooded. We are told that at some points along that part of the Jordan, the river's valley is 150 feet deep, and as much as a mile wide, and that sometimes the snow melting from Mt. Hermon is enough to fill a valley! So here these Hebrew people were camping out on the edge of a deep, swollen, flooded river. Behind them was the wilderness. In front of them was the Promised

Land of Canaan, which God had been promising over and over to give to them. Yet between them and Canaan was this river, seemingly impossible to cross.

Some of *us* would only have to glance at the river, and we would be ready to pronounce Joshua entirely insane! The tension would be building as time went by. The rumors may have been flying. The questions and doubting may have arisen. “We are supposed to cross *that?* Joshua’s crazy!” One day would have been bad enough, yet the Scripture records that they waited *three days!* Can you imagine what effect three days of looking at that river rushing, dashing, charging past would do to *you?*

God never lets anything just happen. I believe this further delay on the banks of the Jordan River was masterfully designed by the Lord God to remind His people of something very, very important: how helpless they were without God, and how strong they were with Him. In all the battles and hardships awaiting them as they were to fight for possession of the land, they were going to have to be firmly possessed by a confidence in God’s power.

Isn’t that the way God deals with us? Doesn’t God work in our lives to bring us to the end of our strength and resources again and again? How many times have you stood before a figurative Jordan River in your lifetime? How many times have you felt so very inadequate to face the challenge or to overcome the obstacle in front of you? Many times, you say? Great! That’s just where God wants you to be. Our weakness and problems and crises are just the opportunities God needs to work a miracle in our lives.

The Apostle Paul was faced with a Jordan River, that for him took the form of what he called a “thorn in the flesh.” He tells us in 2 Corinthians 12 of how he struggled with God to remove it, but to no avail. He probably reached the end of his rope, but that was exactly where God wanted him. There, at the end of the rope, was where Paul heard the words of God: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (v. 9).

On the other hand, it is possible that a refusal on our part to surrender to the power of God will mean that we will never see the amazing things God wants to do among us! We see in Matthew 13:58 that Jesus did not do many mighty works there because of the unbelief of the people. They were not willing to surrender to the power of God as manifested in Jesus. Our community is no different from Nazareth!

As you stand before the Jordan River in your life, ask yourself this important question, one the Hebrews must have asked themselves: “*Am I really willing to surrender to the power of God?*” Just on the other side of that obstacle in your life can be found all the blessings of God through Christ Jesus. Will I sit down meekly on the banks of the river, or will I surrender to God’s power to carry me through?

2 Am I willing to follow the leadership of God? (vv. 3-4a)

How did they, and how do we, know that God is leading us *anywhere*? Look at how prominent is the Ark of the Covenant in this chapter. It is mentioned nine times in the seventeen verses of chapter three, so it must be pretty important. God had told Moses how to build the Ark in Exodus 25. Very specific instructions were given for the dimensions and the building of the Ark of the Covenant. It was covered with gold inside and out. Inside were three things: the stone tablets on which God had given Moses the Law, a container of manna, and the rod of Aaron which budded to show the people whom God had appointed to be priest.

The lid was made of pure gold, and was topped by two cherubim or angels facing each other from either end of the cover. Their wings stretched up and outward, so they nearly met directly above the lid. It was in that space, above the lid of the ark between the cherubim, that God was symbolically understood to dwell. So the ark symbolized the very presence of God with the Israelites.

Ordinarily, the ark stayed in the middle of the camp. But now in Joshua 3:3-4a, the officers of the people told them, “*When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.*” When the ark moves, follow it, wherever it goes.

The three days are up. Perhaps in that three day period the people had asked themselves that first question, “Am I willing to surrender to the power of God?” But now it was time for action! Saying you believe God has the power to help you somehow cross the Jordan is one thing, but actually stepping out into that swollen, flooded river—that’s something else! Saying you believe God can help you in your problems is one thing, but actually stepping out in faith to follow His leadership is quite another thing. Saying we believe God has a plan and a purpose for our church is one thing, but following Him to accomplish His plan for us is something else. That’s why this second question cannot be overlooked if we are going to prime the pumps of consecration. *Am I willing to follow the leadership of God?*

If you and I just could comprehend the ways God seeks to lead us! Think of the wonderful promises God has given us concerning His leadership in our lives. There are incomparable promises such as we find in Isaiah 42:16—*“I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.* God promises to lead us if we will follow! Are we really willing to do that?

There are great and precious promises contained for us in God’s Word concerning His leadership and guidance in our lives:

If I rise on the wings on the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:9-10)

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. (Psalm 23:2)

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’ (Isaiah 30:21)

The New Testament teaches us that this leadership comes to us through the Holy Spirit:

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. (John 16:13)

Many of our problems today are caused by unwillingness to respond to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. He would guide us so much further if we would only follow!

3 Am I willing to recognize the holiness of God? (v. 4b)

Pay attention to what else the officers told the people, at the end of verse four: *“But keep a distance of about a thousand yards (KJV: two thousand cubits) between you and the ark; do not go near it.”* It is true that if the ark was a little more than a half-mile away, most of the people would be able to see it, and know where it was going. But the ark was an extremely holy thing, so holy that no one was allowed to even touch it. In fact, the ark has been constructed with gold rings on each side, through which were passed two poles to be used for carrying it from place to place. Now that the people were finally getting what God

had been promising all these years, they needed to be firmly reminded that their's was a most holy God.

This wasn't the first time God had set geographical limits on His people. When God had told the people to consecrate themselves before He gave the Law to Moses, He told Moses to set boundaries at the base of the mountain, beyond which no Hebrew should pass. Something holy and wonderful was going to be happening on that mountain, and God did not want it profaned by the sinfulness of man. The Ark of the Covenant itself was not just set up in the middle of the camp with a fence around it. It was located in the holiest place in the tabernacle, called the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could enter that place, and then only on the Day of Atonement when he went in to represent the people before God. Now that the people were moving into the Promised Land, it was extremely important for them to remember that the Lord God is a holy God.

After the Hebrews had crossed through the Red Sea, Moses had burst into song to the Lord. In that song, he recognized the awesome holiness of God: *"Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"* (Exodus 15:11). One day the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the Lord, and in that vision, the attendants of God were flying about the throne of God, calling to one another: *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory"* (Isaiah 6:3).

Some would say, "That's what happened in the Old Testament. The blood of Jesus assures us that we can come boldly to the throne of grace." That's certainly true, but it is not the entire truth. We are allowed to approach the throne of grace through Jesus, but that does not lessen the holiness of God! We will be with God, but we will never be just like God. That is the key to understanding this question: *Am I willing to recognize the holiness of God?* So listen to what we read in the Revelation of John. John, in the fourth chapter, saw four living creatures around the throne of God, and those four creatures, day and night, never stopped saying: *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come"* (Revelation 4:8). God is holy, and the distance ordered to be kept between the people and the ark was primarily so they would continue to recognize the holiness of God.

Are you really sure you want to recognize the holiness of God? It would be a good idea to think about that before you answer, because recognizing the holiness of God will result in a change in our lives! The immature Christians of Corinth

needed to recognize the holiness of God in their lives and in their church, so Paul wrote to them about it:

*Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, **perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*** (2 Corinthians 7:1)

A change in our lives is demanded! It is a truth emphasized in Hebrews 12:14—*“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and **to be holy**; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”* Do you need more? *“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy’* (1 Peter 1:15-16). The holiness of God demands holiness in the lives of those who follow Him.

God wanted His people to surrender to His power, and He wanted them to follow His leadership. But He didn’t want them to get so familiar that they grew contemptuous. Following God would have been pointless in Canaan, so filled with idol worship and false gods, if the people failed to recognize the uniqueness of the holiness of God, that He is a God like no other.

Perhaps this element is missing in your Christian experience. We’re ready for God to work something amazing in our lives—at least mentally. But what about spiritually? Are we really willing to recognize the holiness of God, especially if it means there will have to be some changes in our lives?

No water was going to be drawn until that pump in Alabama was primed. But when it was, the water that came out of it was priceless. In the same way, our pumps must be primed if we are to benefit from the blessings of God upon our lives.

The Pump-Priming Principle says that we must prepare ourselves for the blessings of God by consecrating ourselves. It says that we must:

1. Be willing to surrender to the power of God
2. Be willing to follow the leadership of God
3. Be willing to recognize the holiness of God

So hear the call of God, and let these words pierce you through, as you begin even this moment to respond: *“**Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among us.**”*