

Standing in the River

Joshua 3:6-13

IT was a strange command, perhaps the strangest they had heard so far. It may have seemed as though all this sudden power and leadership which had been given to their commander had finally taken its toll on his sanity. It was one thing to be daring; perhaps they were proud of their leader's bravery and boldness. But there is a fine line between daring and foolishness, and it appeared that Joshua had just crossed it.

What Joshua was telling the priests in particular was that the entire nation of Israel was about to cross the flooded, swollen Jordan River. That was okay, but it was the method of crossing the river that may have been in question. Joshua's command to the priests was to take the ark of the covenant of the Lord God, and go stand in the river! Who among us would be willing to do such a thing? Anybody could see that the river was flooded. Why would God ask them to do such a thing as that? Wasn't it extremely dangerous?

Of course it was, but the priests, and the majority of the Hebrews, knew much about their past. They knew how God had led His priests out of Egypt, and how He had parted the waters of the Red Sea so they had a way of escape. They knew how He had miraculously provided food and water while they were in the wilderness. And they knew the promises of God to give them a land of their very own, something this generation of Hebrews had never had.

But stand in the river?

All these long years later, you and I have much to learn about standing in the river. There is a hymn in our hymnbooks, written by Kelso Carter about a hundred twenty-five years ago (1886) which is a favorite of many people: "*Standing on the Promises.*" Remember the words to the first stanza? "*Standing on the promises of Christ my King,/Thro' eternal ages let His praises ring;/Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,/Standing on the promises of God.*"

What a beautiful truth that song expresses! Yet it is a truth that many of us fail to comprehend. What the people of Israel learned in crossing the Jordan River, and what we learn sometimes in our walk with Christ today, is that sometimes standing on the promises requires that we stand in the river!

What do I mean when I say that? When have we ever been commanded by God to stand in a river? In a literal sense, probably never. But in a figurative sense, many, many times.

Just think about it. How many times have you faced a challenge bigger than you? How many times have the obstacles in front of you, between you and your dream, seemed insurmountable? How many times did you grow discouraged and feel tempted to quit? And how many times in the midst of all that did you sense God leading you to do something which simply did not make sense?

You were being told to go stand in the river, to do something which seemed to be a direct insult to your logic and reason. It may have been something in your personal life or business. You knew God was leading you to make that decision, but you were afraid because of the obvious risks.

Or it may have been a decision involving your church, and you felt as though certain decisions having to do with the ministry of the church just did not make sense.

Perhaps the Hebrew people were afraid, too. So, in verse nine, Joshua called the Israelites together to encourage them with a word from God. Have you ever noticed how very reluctant we are to hear a word from God as long as we are afraid we won't like what He says?

God's word to them that day was that He would make it possible for them to stand in the river when everyone else said it was impossible. For all the times you've been asked to stand in the river, hear the word of God, for He tells us how we can do it!

1 We can stand in the river because our God has gone before us, v. 6

It was extremely important that the ark go first. For one thing, we learn in vv. 3-4 of this chapter that the people were to follow it wherever it went. That was how they were to know where to go, especially since they had never been this way before. Then we see in verse six that Joshua commanded the priests to *"Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over ahead of the people."*

Remember that the ark of the covenant represented the very presence of God with the people. So when the Hebrews saw the ark, carried by the priests, leading the

way down toward the flooded Jordan River, they knew right away what that meant. It meant that God was leading the way for them. He was going before them to prepare the way.

On this side of the cross, we don't have an ark leading us, pointing out the way we are to go, dividing the waters for us to cross our rivers. But we have available to us something much better—a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ! In the form of Jesus, our God has crossed over the obstacles in our lives in front of us. He has led the way through the death of His Son Jesus. Jesus has already carried His cross out into the middle of the river we call sin, and died there. And because Jesus has already crossed over, we today can stand in the river without fear.

The Scriptures are very plain that God has gone before us. We learn that through His Son Jesus, God has gone before us to make atonement for our sin. Even now, our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, intercedes on our behalf. That great 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which prophesied concerning the suffering of the coming Messiah, concludes with the words of the Lord God: *“Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors”* (v. 12). That is what Jesus is doing right now—interceding on our behalf before God.

Listen to the beautiful way this is fulfilled in the New Testament: *“Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”* (Romans 8:34). The writer of Hebrews, speaking of the priesthood of Christ, says, *“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them”* (7:25).

So what are you facing right now? In which river are you being asked to stand? It may appear to be impossible, but the Word of God for you today is that you can do what God is leading you to do, and you can do it because God has already gone before you, preparing the way for you to cross. You don't have to do it alone.

2 We can stand in the river because our God Who has gone before us is alive! (v. 10a)

It was not just a slip of the tongue that Joshua referred to the Lord as *“the living God.”* He probably sensed the fear and uncertainty the people were feeling as they faced the river. So he chose his words carefully, and drew a vivid

contrast between the Lord God, who was very much alive, and the false gods their fathers had known in Egypt. It was also a contrast between the Lord God and the false gods worshipped by the inhabitants of Canaan, which they would be facing soon. Joshua was reminding the Hebrew people that their God was unlike any other, because He is alive.

What difference would that make? They were still being asked to go stand in the river. The difference was found in the life of God, something which could not be said for any other god worshipped on the face of the earth. The prophet Isaiah described a craftsman selecting a tree from which to fashion an idol. He said that half of the tree he uses for fuel to keep warm or to cook his food, while from the other half he makes his idol. He said that a man like that even has to be careful to select wood which would not rot. Why? Because a god like that isn't a god at all! It has no power or life to give the people who bow down before it (Isaiah 44).

It was the same problem Paul encountered in the city of Lystra in Acts 14. When a man lame from birth was healed, the people began making preparations to offer sacrifices to Paul and to Barnabas, thinking them to be gods. But Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes in grief, and rushed into the crowd, shouting, "*Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless idols to the living God*" (14:15).

Do you see the contrast there between man-made idols and the God who is alive? The same thing is seen in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, where Paul writes that the people of Thessalonica had "*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*"

Hear Joshua emphasize that word "*living.*" It is a word which can make all the difference for you as you stand in your own personal river. That life of God known by Joshua is the same life made available for us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter knew it: "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has give us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (1Peter 1:3). We can stand in the river because the God Who has gone before us is alive!

3 We can stand in the river because our living God Who has gone before us is among us! (v. 10b)

Joshua said in verse 10, "*This is how you will know that the living God is among you.*" Joshua just accepted the fact that God was with them. That's

what God had been promising all along, isn't it? *"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you"* (1:5b). *"Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go"* (1:9b). *"Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses"* (3:7). For Joshua, there was no question. There was no doubt about it: God was with them.

God didn't stand on the brinks of the Jordan River where it was safe and point out the way they were to go. He didn't fly across to the other side and beckon for them to cross over to Him. He crossed the river with them, and that made all the difference. It was a difference the psalmist knew: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."* (Psalm 23:4).

It was a difference Isaiah tried to share with the people of his day: *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...."* (Isaiah 43:2-3a).

If God being with His people was important then, how much more important is it to us who have been commissioned to carry the Gospel into all the world? After all, it's been nearly two thousand years since Jesus walked among us—how can we be sure of His presence with us today? Jesus Himself gave us the answer to that question: *"For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them"* (Matthew 18:20). Even one of His names, "Emmanuel," means "God with us."

But it gets even better than that! Not only is God with us, but because of the redeeming death of His Son on the cross, we who believe on Jesus have been brought into a wonderful union with Him. *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"* (Galatians 2:20a). Paul told the Colossians that the mystery of God is *"Christ in you, the hope of glory"* (Colossians 1:27b). And John confirmed it in his first letter: *"Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us"* (1 John 3:24).

Think of it! We have the power to stand in our own particular rivers—we have the power to emerge on the other side of any crisis or problem in which we find

ourselves—because our living God Who has gone before us is at the same time among us, even in us, through Jesus Christ!

4 We can stand in the river because our living God Who has gone before us and is among us also gives us the victory! (v. 10c)

Joshua then gave the people a lesson in geography. He named the seven nations of people who already possessed the land: Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites. Moses had already listed them in Deuteronomy 7:1, but there Moses had said that these seven nations were all larger and stronger than the Hebrews.

But listen to what Joshua had to say about them: *“This is how you will know that the living God is among you, and that he will certainly drive out before you”* these seven nations which are larger and stronger than you are. He is going to give you the victory!

And there’s no question but that that is exactly what God did. He stopped the waters of the Jordan River sixteen miles upstream at a town called Adam, so the people crossed over on dry ground. That was to be their proof that God would give them victory in the days and years ahead. The analogy was this: just as God had driven the waters of the *river* back so His people could *enter* Canaan, in the same manner would He drive out the *inhabitants* of the land so His people could *possess* Canaan.

Whenever the people grew weary in the military campaign to possess the land, they had only to look back to this crossing of the Jordan River to remember that their living God had promised not only to go before them into the land, and not only had He promised to be among them in the land, but He had also promised to give them victory in possessing the land.

A quick study of the New Testament will reveal to us that victory is exactly what God promises us through Jesus Christ our Lord. For example: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”* (Romans 8:35, 37).

You see, we can stand in the river today because God has given us the victory through Jesus. It is there, waiting for us to possess it. It is not something which we

can earn or deserve. It is given to us as a free fringe benefit of our saving experience with Christ. This victory given to us by our living God who has gone before us and is among us helps us to proclaim the message of Jesus.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: *“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him”* (2 Corinthians 2:14). Paul also tells us that in the struggles in our lives that *“the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds”* (2 Corinthians 10:1).

This victory is made available to us through Christ, but it is applied to our lives through faith. John wrote in his first letter that *“this is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith”* (5:4). In the final conflict, the powers of Satan will wage war against the Lamb of God, but the Scripture says that *“The Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings [and get this!] and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers”* (Revelation 17:14). It is His battle and His victory, but through our relationship to Jesus, we share in that same victory. The victory is ours as well!

Yes, you may like to claim that you are standing on the promises of God, but sometimes, standing on the promises of God requires that we stand in the river. So you may be standing in the middle of a river right now, figuratively speaking. That river may be flooded, and as the waters rage past, you are afraid or uncertain. What is God trying to say to you today?

Or it may be that deep within you, you sense the leadership of God guiding you to do something which goes against human reason and logic. Perhaps it is to teach a Sunday School class. Perhaps God is calling you to preach or to serve as a missionary. Perhaps His call to you is in the form of more time in prayer and Bible study. Or maybe God is calling our church to step out in areas of giving and ministry where we’ve never been before. In effect, He is telling us to stand in the river. How can we do that?

- We can stand in the river because our God has gone before us through Jesus.
- We can stand in the river because our God Who has gone before us is alive, and that life conquered death through the resurrection of Jesus.
- We can stand in the river because our living God Who has gone before us is among us through Jesus.

- We can stand in the river because our living God Who has gone before us and is among us also gives us the victory through Jesus.

Isn't it about time you put your trust in that kind of God? Yes, He may command you to go stand in the river, but you don't have to be afraid of what He leads you to do.

Not anymore.