

# Joshua 3:7-17

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[0:00] Good morning. Am I there now? Good morning. My name's Graeme. I'm one of the members here. Apologies for a very gravelly voice. The pollen count is high today, isn't it? Have you ever really noticed that one? So it makes your voice go down even lower. So we're going to look at Joshua 3 today, which is a very kind of exciting story and one with lessons for us to learn.

Let me see if the technology works. It does. Okay, wonderful. So I'll read you the story in just a moment. Please follow along. Joshua 3. I'm going to start at verse 2 or so.

But first up, a bit of geography, a bit of history, because this is a map of what is mostly modern day Israel. But these are all the tribes as they would have been when Joshua brought his, led the Israelites round here, up to about here.

And they camped over here, just the wrong side or just to the east of the River Jordan. Galilee is up there. What's called the Dead Sea is down here. And all those tribes on the left is actually the historical situation.

Part of the reading today is going to be those characters. They are basically going to be ejected from the land. Okay. So over here is Jericho, about here. And up in the hills here is Jerusalem, although at that time Jerusalem was little more than a fault, I think.

[1:27] So Jericho was the big target. It was just here over the river. So we're heading over the river. The other thing is that the river is deepest there or widest because, of course, all the water flows this way and it gets widest there.

And everybody knows about the Dead Sea. It's full of salt because nothing comes out of it. A couple of quick caveats as well. In putting that up and talking, I'm not speaking about the modern political situation at all.

I'm talking about the historical situation. And the other quick caveat is, of course, this precedes a war. And violence in the Old Testament is a real thing. And it troubles people, understandably. But don't worry, Tim will deal with that in a couple of weeks' time.

Okay. So we can just enjoy the story. Okay. Having put those two caveats in. Oh, the other one. This is a possible picture of the, well, it's not a picture because they didn't have cameras then, of the Ark of the Covenant.

This isn't Noah's Ark. It's the Ark of the Covenant. It's a box about yay big, like this. And the tablets of stone that Moses put the law on are carried along inside it. It must have been quite heavy.

[2:41] And there are some golden cherubins on the top and two poles through it. So it was carried around with the Israelites as they went through the desert. And they carried it. And they carried it the whole time. So that features big time in the story. So having told you that, let me just read it to you. Follow along, please.

So we're picking up just about verse 2. They camped just to the east of the Jordan there. Verse 2. After three days, after they started camping, the officers went through the camp giving orders to the people.

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, because you've never been that way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the Ark. Do not go near it.

Joshua told the people, consecrate yourself, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things amongst you. This is really building up, isn't it? Joshua said to the priests, take up the Ark of the Covenant and pass on ahead of the people. So they took it up and went on ahead.

Then the Lord said to Joshua, today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.

[ 4 : 03 ] Tell the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant, when you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river. So Joshua then stands up and speaks to the Israelites and said, come here and listen to the word of the Lord your God.

This is how you will know that the living God is among you, and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites. You're watching the map, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites and the Jebusites.

There's all those tribes in that map. See, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. So let's skip to 13.

As soon as the priest who carried the Ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing upstream will be cut off and stand in a heap. So that's all this declaration by Joshua.

So, when the people broke camp to cross Jordan, the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant ahead of them. Now, the Jordan is in flood all during harvest.

[ 5 : 10 ] Yet as soon as the priests who carried the Ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarathun, while the water flowing down to the Sea of Arabah, which is the Dead Sea there, was completely cut off.

So the people crossed opposite Jericho. The priest who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry land.

That's quite a story, isn't it? A tremendously powerful milker and a big build-up. So, let's see if we can just take the story and understand it a bit better.

So, what happened first is what I would call preparation. They were well prepared. They had a promise.

You will take this land. It was 500 years old, that promise. 500 years. There had been 400 years in Egypt. And previous to that, Abraham had turned up a little before that, and there had been 40 years in the desert.

[ 6 : 32 ] So, it was the best part of 500 years ago. They had been told that was the land to take. So, there was clearly a promise behind it. But, as I said, they spent 40 years in the desert. They could have spent two weeks in the desert, but because the people who came out of Egypt lacked some faith and they rebelled, God said, these people aren't going into the Promised Land, which is a tragic commentary, a tragic commentary on those people.

So, despite the fact that they'd seen the Red Sea parting, they didn't get to the Promised Land, and most of them died. They'd done some spying. The first set of spies had come back with a bad report, and things went wrong.

The second set of spies that Sean was talking about last week came back with a good report. So, there's preparation. What else? There was leadership.

There was organization. And there was the officers and the priests. We read in the beginning of the text, didn't we? It was all sorted well. The people got together. The officers were told to get the people. The Levites were in front of them.

And there was 900 yards in my Bible. Well, maybe your Bible's modern. It says 800 meters or something. Anyway, there was a space. It was well organized, and they had to stay well behind the ark.

[ 7 : 48 ] So, there was definitely a need for preparation. Now, the next thing I found that was very powerful in this, there's this huge declaration between verse 9 onwards.

He doesn't just say, let's go and get on with it. He says, the Lord of all... The living God is amongst you. The Lord of all the earth. He says that several times. And he says, this is how you'll know that the Lord is with you.

Because the Lord will drive out all those tribes. And, not only that, see the ark of the Lord of the covenant will go ahead of you. As soon as the priest who carried the ark, he predicted that as soon as the Levites stood in the water, the water would stop.

This was a prediction. This was the head of time. This will happen as part of this huge declaration.

So, the miracle will prove that God is really with them.

And it will give them courage to go on. Which is tremendous, really. And I think the declaration is very, very important there. So, what actually happened?

[ 8 : 59 ] Well, the ark went first. Very important. It's a very important point in what's going on here. The ark went first. God's presence. His word went first.

They actually have to step into the river. Get their feet wet. The people then came second. It was 900 yards later. And notice this.

The obedience of stepping into the river precedes the miracle. Then the waters stop some miles further north. And they can walk across on dry land.

Now, of course, I've always mentioned this. God has got form in this. He did it 40 years earlier with Moses. So, this is kind of a repeat. So, the people could have been half expecting this. But they still had to be greatly encouraged.

So, what's the result of this crossing? Well, the water stands up in a heap. It's simple. The people cross safely. Most important probably here, God is glorified.

[ 10 : 00 ] Can you imagine yourself in that situation where we're walking into a river, the priests are up ahead, and we're going to invade that Jericho, which is a few miles over there, and the water's parted.

What would you say? Wow. Wow. Wow. Why was there glory to God? Because Joshua told me that would happen. Joshua told me that God was going to do this.

And God has done it. So, God is glorified. God has done it. Importantly also, Joshua is confirmed as the leader because he's the one who said it would happen. He's the one who led them.

And the stage is set for the conquest of Jericho and the rest of the region. So, so far so good.

It's quite a straightforward story, isn't it? How do we apply this? This has been applied in lots of ways. But, you know, the travels of the Israelites illustrate to us how God deals with us.

[ 11 : 00 ] So, it's the same God, and he deals with his church in a kind of parallel way. Not that we go around invading places. Not at all. In fact, we have, as I say, a story.

We have a mission. Our mission is not to invade the promised land. But it is. Well, in fact, we're given several missions. Jesus said, very clearly, go into all the world, preach the gospel, and make disciples.

That was his instruction to us. That's kind of the equivalent of, go invade the land. Okay? We don't invade the land these days because that's Old Testament.

In the New Testament, we have an instruction, which is to take the gospel. The other thing Jesus tells us to do is, he says, be a light to the world. And that's in the context of the kingdom.

The kingdom is not military. It's a kingdom of God's peace, humility, justice, righteousness, purity, and healing. All those things you see, particularly in Matthew 5.

[ 12 : 06 ] All the things of the kingdom. Now, building the church and building the kingdom are not separate things. They're kind of, they're not competing. They don't overlap. The church is about people, and the kingdom is about God's rule, bringing all the blessing that he wants to to the whole world through us.

Now, let's tone it down slightly because that sounds a bit big, doesn't it? Let's say that our mission is to take the gospel and the kingdom to Alton, which it is.

Okay? So that's a little bit more digestible, isn't it? If you say the whole world. But that is our mission. So what is our river to cross? You know?

What is our river to cross? Now, what are our barriers to mission? What stops us doing those things?

Taking the blessing of God to the world? Well, it can be all sorts of things, and it's different for each of us, I'm sure. Sometimes it's a bit of apathy, a bit of unbelief. We don't believe God is...

[ 13 : 13 ] I mean, Jesus just mentioned that we might do those things. He didn't. He instructed us to go. As I used to say to my team, I used to run a team, and you give them tasks, and you say, it's not a suggestion, guys.

It's not a suggestion. Jesus did not suggest that we spread the kingdom of God. He instructed us to. Okay? But equally well, he then went up to heaven and sent his Holy Spirit to be our Joshua.

Okay? The Holy Spirit leads us. He is our Joshua who takes us into that place. So what was I saying? The barriers to mission.

Well, it could be discouragement, opposition from the world. The world doesn't like us, increasingly so. Lack of unity, all sorts of things. Lack of resources. Which is not to say that we're being fruitless here at all.

We've got a load of ministries. I sat down with my wife and said, can we list all the things the church does? We came up with lots. There's cap debt. There's job club. There's money. There's fresh start. There's one way. There's all sorts of children's and adults ministries.

[ 14 : 14 ] There's Alpha. There's Stepping Stones. There's Food Bank. There's Open Book. And I've probably left a few off. But wouldn't it be great if we had twice the number of people in all those things?

Yeah? Maybe not all of them. Steve's agreeing with me. Wouldn't it be great if we saw twice the number of people in all those ministries which variously preach and help people and minister to people?

That would be great, wouldn't it? But what's the barrier? Well, if the barrier is discouragement, how can we overcome that barrier? Okay? So let's go back.

And this is why Joshua is so interesting and so useful because it gives us a kind of template that we can say, what should we do? How do we prepare ourselves? How do we prepare ourselves to overcome the things that might hold us back?

Like discouragement or whatever the thing, you know, lack of resources. For each of us in different ministries, it'll be different things. What holds us back? How do we prepare ourselves to go through that?

[ 15 : 15 ] Well, be clear what the mission is. We've just discussed that in general terms. But we need specifics because what is right in one country, in one city, is not necessarily right for Alton.

The needs are different. In some places, there is literally starvation going on. In Alton, there isn't. So different things in different places. So we need to pray.

We need to look to the prophetic word. We need dreams. We need visions to know what specifically we need to do here. We need to follow our leadership as well.

We have elders. Now, those two things don't conflict. Okay? In the Old Testament, all the leadership was done through Joshua. He's one man. He's leading everybody. That's because that is the nature of God's revelation at that time.

In the New Testament period, we all know God directly by his spirit. But we still need leadership. But I'm sure, I didn't check this with the elders earlier, but they'd be very happy for you to share with them your dreams and your visions for ministry here.

[ 16 : 20 ] Yeah? And it's their job to make sure it all kind of makes sense and all works in the right direction and doesn't go crazy. That's their job, to guard the flock and make sure it's going in the right direction. But actually, all of us can say, well, I've got this vision for this ministry in this part of Alton.

Or, hey, I could do something new. Or I could do something. We could make this bigger. And I'm sure that will go down. That will be the right thing to do. Unity.

Unity is super important. Now, go back to where Israelites had some of them looking at Jericho and looking at the very wide river. Says, I've got this idea, Josh. I'll take my tribe up north where the river is narrower.

If you go far enough north, it gets narrower and narrower. And we'll do that. And another one who said, well, I'll go south because if you go around south of the Dead Sea, there's no river at all. And we can walk into the promised land that way.

But they had to line up behind Joshua, even though it was the most difficult part to cross. It is really important that we maintain unity. The devil would love to see us fragmented and so ineffective.

[ 17 : 26 ] What are our declarations? There was this huge declaration made by Joshua. The Lord of all the earth is going to do this. How do we declare? Well, I think the important thing, the ark went first.

Now, this is our ark. It's a bit smaller. But this is our ark. It's called the Bible. And it is the thing we put first. This sets our standard. This is our standard for all things, really.

Not that we're wacky fundamentalists. We need to interpret the Bible carefully. But we do need to take it very seriously. And we can't just say, because society doesn't agree with this at the moment, we won't do it.

We follow this first. So the ark goes first. Scripture goes first. What else? How can we... Sorry, it's a rather busy slide. How can we declare things?

Because it's not just our Joshua. It's all of us. Well, we can speak encouragement to one another. We can build ourselves up. We can remind one another of God's promises.

[ 18 : 32 ] What has God done in the past for us? God has done a lot in the past. Here, we have a big building. We have a nice building. God has done a lot for us in the past. It's worth a lot of money. Okay? A lot of work went into it.

A lot of faith went into it. Ministries have been built. A lot of faith went into that. We can say, look, God's done this in the past, so we can do it in the future. We can declare things to each other. We can share encouraging answers to prayer. Now, we shouldn't be discussing the weather. I mean, the weather's nice. But it would be much better if we were discussing answers to prayer and saying, look, during the week, this happened.

Because we encourage each other, which is what Joshua was doing and saying, this is where we go. We're going to cross this river. And the key is the living God, which is from wherever it was in the text there, the living God is amongst us.

It was among us. We should be at that kind of point of saying, if we encourage each other, we can be at the point of saying, now God is amongst us. Now we can move on.

[ 19 : 35 ] So, let me catch up with myself. Okay, so how do we overcome, specifically, what are the actions that we might do?

Having declared to ourselves and prepared ourselves, what are the specific things we might do? Worship is really important. We should give ourselves to worship. Now, the worship band's lovely. But they're not here to entertain us or even to worship for us. They're here to lead us. Okay? They're leading us in worship. So when we give ourselves, you know, I don't like this tune very much.

I don't like the key. I can't really sing it. Well, never mind. Worship God. Because if you worship God, you are actually doing a very important action, spiritually speaking, and bringing yourself more into the presence of God.

We could take new, costly steps of obedience, as I've put it here. What could we do?

[ 20 : 37 ] We could invite people along to meet us more. We could open our home up. That would be good. More generally, just act in faith. Take a risk. Sometimes, you'll get it wrong.

And that's kind of okay. The only person who ever got their ministry right was Jesus, because he knew exactly what he was doing. And the rest of us don't. Hopefully, if you pray, you talk to people, you consult, act in faith, take a risk.

I think praying for people is really important. Sorry, it's a bit of a clumsy statement. Pray for and with people in and outside of the church. Really important to pray for people. I took a small step a couple of years ago.

Our neighbor was very sick, so I said to the neighbor, it was a very difficult conversation, because I'm sure the neighbor thinks I'm a religious nut. But I said, I'll pray for you.

The neighbor was quite sick. And actually, the neighbor got a pretty, it was a big improvement fairly quickly. Now, I don't know where that's going to end. And in one sense, it's not my problem.

[ 21 : 47 ] I've done my bit. I've spoken. I've prayed. I've stepped out. I've done something. And God will do whatever God will do. And we can trust God to do that, because, you know, he sometimes parts rivers, you know.

We might want to serve in the church in a new area. This is not to say we need new volunteers, which we could do in some areas. But actually, I think we're more keen on getting more people in to bless more people.

And remember that obedience precedes fruit.

Sometimes you have to go, and then something happens. Or maybe it doesn't happen for six months. You have to step first. So that's the lesson of Joshua 3.

Okay, let's... What's going to be the result? And this is tricky, because we can't tell God what to do. But let's say our risk-taking, if we take the risks and step out and do things that sometimes are going to cost us a bit, it's going to be embarrassing.

[ 23 : 03 ] It might cost us financially. It might cost us some time. But God honors it. Yeah? God honors our obedience. It's for God to work out what that means, but God honors our obedience.

Now, not because our obedience earns anything. God is not a slot machine. We can't say, I've done this. God, where are you? No. It's obedience expresses trust and faith.

And if you step in trust and faith in relationship with God, he will respond the right way. So, let's obey Jesus together.

And God will lift discouragement. When we step, he will lift discouragement. There will be encouragement instead. And we can look forward to new fruit. I've gone ahead of myself. Yeah. Every time we step, we also see more of God's presence with us. Especially if it's a big step and the river is very wide. And the stage is set, as it was for Joshua, the stage is set for us for more fruitful ministry.

[ 24 : 13 ] Because we've stepped forward. We've done something. We've seen God at work. And now, oh, we can now do more. We can now do more. We can see more of the kingdom coming.

Okay. Okay. I've got another. I'm having a conversation with the timekeeper there.

Actually, Ben, could you come up? Let me tell you a quick story about where I stepped out in something. It's not particularly exciting. And it's not a massive ministry thing.

But it might illustrate the point in that I used to work in IT for many, many years. And frankly, I got a bit bored with it at times. And I thought, what else could I do? And I prayed. And I thought, well, perhaps I could do teaching. Because I kind of like teaching. And every time I thought about it, I thought, no, the kids are awful.

It's very stressful. And I'm quite a quiet, shy guy. It would not like it. It wouldn't work. But no way am I going anywhere and need teaching. No way.

[ 25 : 17 ] And I was frightened of it, really. Not unreasonably. Then, seven years ago, I stopped full-time work. And I got a little pension. And I could work part-time, which is nice.

So I then said to Gainesville, what should I do? Looked at various things. And then this idea about teaching came up. So I took a step. I took a step here.

And I went to the college, the Sixth Form College. And I became a, I applied and got a job as a teaching assistant. I took a step. So I was sitting with kids on a daily basis, helping them do their stuff.

GCSE retakes and BTEC engineering and various things. It was OK. It was fairly interesting. But as I went in, and I was there for a part-time job, but I was there quite often, sitting, listening to teaching, I thought, hmm, actually, maybe I could teach.

And actually, the kids are not too bad. There. OK. But I became encouraged, because I'd taken a step, right?

[ 26 : 20 ] And so then, towards the end of the year, I said to the boss, if I wanted to be a teacher, which I don't, what would I have to do? Well, I was told that there's a minimum qualification you have to do.

OK. What's that? So I paid £300 and did an online course, which took a month full-time. I did it over the summer. So I took another step. And I got this qualification, which is minimum qualification for further education.

So I went back to college as an assistant. And I said, oh, you're a teacher now. You can take classes. So I suddenly find myself in charge of classes. But then about two weeks later, and it was only a couple of weeks later, the computer science teacher left.

And an advert went out. And I thought, well, I could apply for that, because I've got minimum qualifications and background just about. Maybe. No, I can't do that. And then, as I prayed, I felt encouraged to do it.

So I let the application date go. And the following week, I'm still thinking I ought to do this. So I sat down and wrote an application. And I thought, it's late.

[ 27 : 30 ] I've got the minimum qualifications. I've got no experience. And I'm old. And I'm sure they'd much rather have a young graduate with the right qualifications.

So I put this in, thinking, if this is flies, then this is of God. And I'll do it. Probably shouldn't have thought that. Three days later, please come for interview.

What? Very easy interview. Three days later, can you start next week, please? So I'm like, phew. I'm standing at the edge of a cliff, thinking, oh, that's really quite hard.

So I did a lot of work, a lot of preparation. And I did it. We got stuck in. I was up in front, nine hours a week, in front of two sets of two classes, an hour and a half at a time, trying to teach these kids. Halfway through the term, I picked up. Computer Science A-level. Which I had to learn a lot of new stuff. But I was very glad I did it. I was very satisfied. And I was very thankful to God that God had led me there.

[ 28 : 34 ] Because I was very happy doing it. And felt very engaged. I did it for five years. In fact, stopped last summer. So I took one easy step. One slightly bigger step.

And then, oh, I'm going to do this. And, okay, this is not about ministry, but it just illustrates sometimes you have to kind of take a bit of a risk. What is God saying to me? Maybe. And step like that. Okay. Shall we pray? Father God, you've given us a mission. And you promised to guide us. So please strengthen us today to take those steps we need to. Let us be listening to you. Let us be trusting you to help us overcome kind of barriers, whatever they may be. And move into new things. Amen.