

The God Who Goes Before

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God's presence and power does not negate our responsibility to obey in faith; rather, it makes possible our faith response.

Military soldiers periodically practice drills from the early days of boot camp until the end of their military career. Even though learning to march in a group and follow orders is mastered within the first few attempts, military leaders do not abandon the practice and simply assume soldiers will remember the basics. But drill is practiced because it teaches more than just muscle memory—it teaches obedience, discipline, and respect to generations to come by passing along the legacy.¹

In Egypt, God instructed the Israelites to prepare a Passover meal and to teach their children the meaning of the Passover throughout their generations (Ex. 12:24-27). His instructions were akin to a military exercise because it taught future generations—through repetition and rehearsal—the value of obedience, discipline, and fear of the Lord their God.



Voices from Church History

“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”²

—Corrie ten Boom
(1892-1983)



What are some spiritual practices that we engage in to help “drill” the faith into us and pass it along to our children?



How might these methods change over time?

In this session, we see how God established Joshua as the new leader of His people. Many of the words and actions in Joshua 3 are reminiscent of God's previous words and actions in Israel's history. God was leading His family in a military drill to remind them of His faithfulness, His abilities, and His wisdom. As we see how Israel was reminded to obey and revere God, trusting in His steadfast leadership, so we are inspired to trust in the God who goes before us. Because God is present and powerful, we can trust in Him to guide us into the future that is unknown to us but known to Him.

1. God Himself goes before us (Josh. 3:5-13).

⁵ Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you."⁶ And Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.

⁷ The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you." ⁸ And as for you, command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, "When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan."⁹ And Joshua said to the people of Israel, "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God."¹⁰ And Joshua said, "Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. ¹¹ Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. ¹² Now therefore take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man. ¹³ And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap."

Joshua informed the people that God would perform mighty acts on the next day. The mighty acts were not foretold; however, they were anticipated. It was the people's responsibility to prepare themselves for what God had prepared for them.

Consecration, or purification, is an act of people setting themselves apart for the work of God in their midst. It is not just getting rid of outward distractions; it also includes wholeness of the heart, an inner preparation for God to move in us and through us. The people needed to be ready for the miracles God would perform on their behalf.



Why is it important to consecrate oneself and be spiritually prepared for God to work in mighty ways?



What are some examples of things we do to prepare our hearts?

In this passage, we see how the Lord reiterated His promise to Joshua and demonstrated that Joshua was the new leader who was following the path of Moses. In Joshua 1:5, God told Joshua: “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.”

God was with Joshua in power in the same way He was with Moses in the parting of the waters. As the Lord divided the Red Sea for Moses and the children of Israel so they could cross over into the wilderness, so God would open the Jordan River for Joshua and the Israelites so they could cross over into the promised land.

God went before Joshua and prepared the way. Joshua would not have to vindicate himself or make himself respected among the Hebrew nation—God would exalt Joshua in the sight of all Israel so they would have the same confidence in his leadership that they had in the long-tenured leadership of Moses. Joshua’s responsibility was to remain humble and trust that God would exalt him.



Voices from the Church

“As we prepare our hearts, souls, and minds for God to work, we position ourselves to expect Him, to hear Him, to see Him.”³

—Michael Catt

This is the dynamic of God’s kingdom. Jesus later said that those who humble themselves will be exalted (Matt. 23:12); those willing to be last will be first (Matt. 19:30; 20:16); those who lose their life will find it (Matt. 10:39; 16:25); those willing to serve will be great (Matt. 23:11); and those willing to die will live (John 12:25).



Why was it important for God to assure Joshua of His presence and power?



In what ways does God “go before us” in the struggles of our lives?

The imperative “Stand still in the Jordan” reminds us of what God told Moses in Exodus 14:13 when the children of Israel stood at the edge of the Red Sea with Pharaoh in hot pursuit behind them. They were panicked and even threatened to stone Moses because they saw no escape and were terrified that Pharaoh would slaughter them. They blamed Moses for putting them in this precarious position.

Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today” (Ex. 14:13). They stood still and God opened the Red Sea. Here the priests stood still in the midst of the Jordan River, which was soon to become an interstate highway for God’s people to cross over into the promised land.



The people in this scene knew from their ancestors of God’s power to part the waters, but many had not experienced this miracle themselves. Why is it important for every generation to witness the wondrous work of the Lord for themselves, not simply rely on what others have said?

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

12. *God Is Omnipotent*

God is all-powerful: there is nothing God cannot do so long as it does not contradict His own nature or law. God has power and authority over the universe He created, from the largest solar system to the smallest particle. Affirming that God is all-powerful does not mean that God can sin—since that would go against His perfect moral nature. As Christians, we rest in the belief that the God who has all power is good, and we gain great comfort by knowing that an all-powerful God is working for our good and joy.

2. God calls us to obey in faith (Josh. 3:14-17).

¹⁴ So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), ¹⁶ the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷ Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

Imagine the scene. You are one of the travelers walking toward the Jordan River. Sure, you have heard the stories about the Israelites of old passing through the Red Sea on dry ground, but *they* are not here. *This* is largely a new generation of Israelites.

Perhaps you do not think the new generation has enough faith. Perhaps you do not believe your generation has worshiped enough. Perhaps you reflect on the laws and statutes that have not been kept perfectly and you wonder if God will do for your generation what He did at the Red Sea. You continue walking—steadily stepping, steadily worrying, steadily having a conversation with yourself about faith or your lack thereof.

The priests make it to the edge of the Jordan. They step in and you see the waters to the north standing in a heap a good distance away. The waters to the south going toward the Dead Sea have been cut off. You blink. Can this be? The Jordan River is at flood stage (Josh. 3:15), yet the land before you is dry. An interstate has opened for *this* generation. Can this be? Do you dare follow the ones walking in front of you? Can you trust your life to the crowd's actions? How tall can the water heap stand before it topples anyway?



How have you handled situations when you are more frightened by what lies ahead than confident your faith is strong?

This chapter is a vivid picture of the necessity of following God and doing things God's way in order to inherit God's blessings. John H. Sammis poetically expressed this truth in a hymn based on a young man's decision to follow God in faith. In response to D. L. Moody's sermon, the young man admitted to not understanding it all but having decided to follow God. Sammis wrote, "When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word, what a glory He sheds on our way! While we do His good will, He abides with us still, and with all who will Trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."⁴

Israel lived in community with one another and could draw on one another for strength and encouragement in their struggles with obedience. God expected Israel to obey Him just as He expects Christians to obey Him.



How well is our church doing when it comes to supporting and encouraging one another to obey God in faith? How can we do better?

Voices from the Church

"Your faith may be just a little thread. It may be small and weak, but act on that faith. It does not matter how big your faith is, but rather, where your faith is."⁵

—Billy Graham

3. God calls us to remember and testify to His power (Josh. 4:19-24).

¹⁹ The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. ²⁰ And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. ²¹ And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' ²² then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' ²³ For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, ²⁴ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever."

Joshua commanded the 12 men representing the 12 tribes of Israel to bring stones from the middle of the Jordan. Those 12 stones were to be a memorial at Gilgal for future generations. The memorial stones would remind Israel of what God could do since they came from the place the priests stood while Israel crossed the Jordan.

Joshua revealed the reason for the stones that were taken out of the Jordan and set up at Gilgal. He anticipated the children of future generations would ask, “What do these stones mean?” Joshua made it obligatory for parents and leaders to tell the children of their generation that the stones were memorials and reminders that God had made a way through the Jordan River for Israel to pass over on dry ground.

All these miracles took place in order to give testimony to all the people of the earth that God is almighty and He is to be feared and revered forever. Just as the stones had a story to tell, you and I have a story to tell.



When was the last time you were able to give a testimony to God's powerful work in your life? How can we find strength in the testimony of others?

God told Joshua and the Israelites to set up memorial stones to remember what God had done to bring them into the promised land. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus told His disciples to remember the sacrifice He was going to make to save us from our sins. When Christians eat the Lord's Supper, we remember God's plan to destroy sin through Jesus' death and resurrection.

God calls us to remember and to testify of His power. When Moses questioned God about his leading the people, God turned Moses' rod into a snake. God said miracles would happen so “that [the Israelites] may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you” (Ex. 4:5). God calls us to tell the story to one another and to unbelievers so they might believe.



What kinds of thoughts, feelings, and fears inhibit you from sharing your testimony?

Conclusion

It seems easy to take the Lord's Supper and miss the seriousness of the cross. There on the cross of Calvary, Jesus suffered alone. He walked up the Via Dolorosa carrying the cross of Calvary, and the One who holds the whole world in His hand was so weak that He fell down under the weight of the cross.

He who knew no sin became sin to redeem sinners. With blood dripping from His brow, His hands, and His feet as He died on the cross for sinners, He demonstrated His great love with His willingness to give His life on the cross for those who could never pay the price.

Don't ever forget the cross. God's miracles are not simply for personal edification—they are meant to inspire those who learn about them to believe and give glory to God. He can give you the courage necessary to testify of Him.



Voices from Church History

"You will never cease to be the most amazed person on earth at what God has done for you on the inside."⁶

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)

CHRIST CONNECTION: God told Joshua and the Israelites to set up memorial stones to remember what God had done to bring them into the promised land. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus told His disciples to remember the sacrifice He was going to make to save us from our sins. When Christians eat the Lord's Supper, we remember God's plan to ultimately destroy sin through Jesus' death and resurrection.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to recount His mighty works in history and in our lives so that others will know He is powerful.

1. List some of your experiences of God going before you and displaying His power.

2. What are some specific actions God is calling you to obey in faith?

3. What are some ways we can help each other overcome our reticence to testify to God's saving power in Jesus Christ?

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