

Truth for Today

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Lessons from the Journey of the Children of Israel: The Jordan

There is no river in the whole world like the Jordan. Compared with many rivers it is quite short, being only about two hundred miles long. But no other river falls so far from its source to its end. The meaning of the name of Jordan is 'The Descender'. From its source in the Lebanon, which is 1,700 feet above sea level, to its entrance into the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the earth's surface being 1,292 feet below sea level, it falls 2,992 feet through 27 rapids.

As the only river that flows into the lowest point on the earth's surface, this alone makes it unique. But how fitting that a river with these characteristics and called The Descender, is used in the Scriptures as typical of death. How like Adam's fall! From his creation by the hand of God and his lofty privilege of communion with God in the garden, to his fall through disobedience which brought sin and death into the world, and his being cast out of the Garden of Eden. There is nothing like the power of sin and death that brings man to his lowest point, death being the judgment of God against sin.

In Genesis 2:17 we read "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." While it may be true that Adam did not die on that very day, yet the sentence of death was upon him and as far as God was concerned he was morally dead. Such is our condition as born of Adam's race. In Romans 5:2 we read "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." We are conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity, as David says in Psalm 51. Some may say, "Why then am I judged for something that I cannot help?" The answer to that is that God has provided the remedy. Because "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And again "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised for our justification." God will not condemn me for something I cannot help, but He certainly will for not applying the remedy of accepting the Lord Jesus as my Saviour.

The first mention of the Jordan in the Bible is in Genesis 13, where we read "And Lot lifted up his eyes and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah." Lot was led by what was attractive to nature, but it was all to come under the judgment of God. What a disgraceful end he had, despite the fact that he was the companion of a man of God!

What a warning this is! There may be many things that appeal to us naturally, especially the pleasures of sin. But let us take warning; this will all come under God's judgment.

In our studies of the journey of the Children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan, the Jordan was the last barrier that they had to cross before they could enter into the land of blessing that God had given them. There is much instruction for us in this. One of the most difficult lessons that we have to learn as Christians is that we get no blessing from God apart from death! Of course, that does not mean our own natural death. But our blessings from God all begin with the death of His own beloved Son. Apart from that we could have nothing. But also we have to learn what the Apostle Paul learnt as he writes in Romans 7:18, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." He cries out in verse 24, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" But he does not stop there; he goes on to say, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." How difficult it is for us to understand that there is not a scrap of good in anyone of us in the sight of God. Paul had to learn that, and Paul was far more righteous according to the law than we are. But there was nothing in Saul of Tarsus according to the flesh that was pleasing to God; he had to go, figuratively, in the death of Christ before God could use him.

There is also much to learn from the last incident that the Children of Israel had before they came to the Jordan. We read of this in Numbers 21, and the LORD Jesus refers to it in John 3. It is the incident of the brazen serpent. "And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." Those who were bitten by the serpent and died brought to an end the generation that came out of Egypt, none of whom, apart from Joshua and Caleb and all those under age, went into Canaan. Hebrews 3 tells us why. Verse 10 says, "Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest." It says also in verse 17, "But with whom was He grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?" and in verse 19, "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief."

All those who looked to the uplifted serpent received life on the principle of faith. So they became a new generation, living through faith and obedience. Not like all those who had died in the wilderness. This new generation can go over the Jordan and into the Promised Land. We learn from this story that what we are naturally as men and women after the flesh cannot enter into the blessing that God wants to give us. The old nature is unreliable and unable to produce anything for God. Romans 8:8 tells us, "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God". The Lord's words to Nicodemus in John 3 make it quite clear that, before we can enter into eternal life through faith in God's Son, we have to look to the Son of Man lifted up on a cross to deal with all that we are and all that we have done. Verses 14 to 16 say, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Referring again to the Apostle Paul's experience in Romans 7, he goes on in chapter 8 to explain how we can be delivered from "the body of this death." In verses 2 and 3 he says "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." This explains the verses we have read in the book of Numbers. The serpent put upon a pole as an object for faith was like the very thing that had caused all the trouble. When God gave His beloved Son to die at Calvary, there God made Him to be sin for us. What had brought us under the penalty of death was laid on Him, and He suffered, the Just for us the unjust.

So we learn from these scriptures that we need a new life in order to enter into God's blessing. The Holy Spirit could not come upon a nature that God had condemned. So that nature had to be put away. This was done in the death of Christ. Looking to Him in faith gives me a life, which is according to God, and is sealed by the Holy Spirit. He gives me the power to enter into God's inheritance.

So we come to the Israelite's crossing of the Jordan. We read about this in Joshua 3 and 4. Reading these, you cannot miss how often the ark is mentioned in various ways. The Ark of the Covenant, as it is called, normally. It marked the meeting place between God and man and is generally a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ stayed in the Tabernacle. The only way we can experience practically in our lives the victory that the Lord Jesus has won for us by His going into death and rising again, is by keeping company with Him. In doing so we shall learn much about His glorious person.

We read in verses 2 and 3, "And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host; and they commanded the people saying, 'When ye see the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.'" The three days would teach us that there is a need for preparation and consideration about this matter. Also we know that the number three in the Scriptures always brings us to the thought of resurrection. They were to go forward, with their eyes on the ark, which would allow them to pass over to the other side.

In verse 4 we read, "Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore." There must always be with us a reverence for the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a depth of feeling and intensity of suffering that we can never understand. When the Lord Jesus went into the garden of Gethsemane, we read in Luke 22:41, "And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed." His dear disciples could not enter into what He was to pass through during the following hours. He only could bear the judgement of God against sin He knew all that was to come upon Him; nevertheless His love carried Him through it.

Verses 14 to 16 tell us of the wonderful event that happened when the priests took up the ark and stood in the Jordan. "And it came to pass, when the people removed from their tents, to pass over Jordan, and the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people; and as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water, (for Jordan overflowed all his banks all the time of harvest,) that the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho."

David, in Psalm 114:5, refers to this event and seems to mock the Jordan because it was cut off: "What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? Thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back?" This is very similar to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory." The power of those descending waters of Jordan met a force that was greater than they and had to flee away. So it is with faith that rests on the work of Christ. When facing death, we can know with assurance that death has lost its sting and the grave its victory.

But we must notice that little comment that the Jordan overflowed all its banks at that time. This would not only tell us that the river was in full spate and flowing at its fastest, but would remind us that the Lord Jesus faced the

overwhelming power of sin and death. It seemed as if the power of Satan reached its peak and broke with all its terrible force against Him. Was there ever such treachery as when Judas betrayed Him for thirty pieces of silver? One whom He had called his friend, yet he betrayed Him with a kiss. Or such wicked men, who came to take Him, led by the elders of Israel. His own people whom He had come to save rejected Him and were going to choose a thief and a murderer instead. Think of the dreadful cruelty that He endured from the hands of men. He held their breath in His hands, yet said never a word of rebuke. It seemed as if Satan had complete control over those wicked men, who were allowed to do what they liked to Him.

I often think of those words of Isaiah, "His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men." I believe after those men had scourged and beaten Him, spat in His face and put a crown of thorns on His head, that He was unrecognisable. He was so bruised and battered. We are told what produces this enmity against God in man's heart in Colossians 1:21, "And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind, by wicked works." All the alienation that sin had produced in man's heart making God an enemy, was seen in all its terror when God's beloved Son was so ill treated. Our hearts may well shrink from such things, but remember, this is what my and your heart is capable of. But the love of God, in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, was greater than it all. The power of Satan was met by a greater force and fled!

But, of course, nothing that man did to Him could be compared with what He suffered from the hand of God. What a spectacle Calvary must have been! The jeering crowd with the cruel soldiers guarding the cross. The passers-by mocking Him. The dreadful pain of crucifixion with pierced hands and feet, His thorn crowned brow and back torn and bleeding. His feelings are described in Psalm 22:14-15, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and Thou hast brought Me into the dust of death." Men saw all this suffering, but when we come to His suffering for our sins at the hand of God, darkness covered the scene. What took place between Him and God none of us will ever understand. We hear His words again from that same Psalm, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" We know the answer to that question. It was for us, because He bore our sins in His own.

The description of how the waters of Jordan were held back as far as the city Adam, and the water that flowed into the Salt sea failing, would tell us that the water went completely out of sight. At the Red sea, when the children of Israel passed through, the water stood like a wall on each side. But here, when the Jordan met the ark, it went away out of sight. How completely has the death of Jesus broken the power of death for the believer! So much so that when a believer dies it is no more than going to sleep! Thessalonians 4:14 says, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which **sleep in Jesus** will God bring with Him."

The river Jordan was also the boundary of the Promised Land. Sadly two and a half tribes chose to stay on the east side of the Jordan. The children of Reuben and Gad, with half the tribe of Manasseh, were more concerned about their cattle and their children than going into the land of promise. They were lacking in faith in God who had given them the land. He was well able to look after their cattle and children.

We are warned about this in Hebrews 3:12: "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

We have seen, this morning, how that the Israelites had to go through the river Jordan, that powerful symbol of death, before ever they could enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land. So too the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus has secured for us all the blessings that God wants to share with us. We shall indeed enjoy them to the full this when we are all in heaven with the Lord Jesus, but God wants us to enjoy them now. We need love for Christ and faith in all that He has done in order to enjoy our promised land. By our daily communion with Christ may we enter into and enjoy all those blessings which He wants to give us now.

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