

Standing on the Brink

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, if you would, open your Bibles with me to the passage that we read in the book of Joshua, chapter 3 and 4. It'll be a great help to us tonight. Standing on the brink.

Well, here we are. We are standing on the brink at last of perhaps the most significant upheaval and change that we've faced in our congregation, at least in physical terms, for a very long time.

Perhaps even generations. Of course, there have been renovation works before, a number of them, but I guess probably nothing quite on this scale since the building was actually built, completed as it was in 1808.

That's quite a thought, isn't it? This is the last time, I suppose, God willing, that I'll be preaching from this particular pulpit. They set the plan, the historic Scotland people and the Church Committee on Architecture want us to have something more appropriate, more proportional to the original dimension.

And this pulpit was a much later edition. But at any rate, however we look at it, we are on the brink of something new, something exciting. Something really rather scary.

[1 : 18] And of course, that's exactly where the children of Israel were in Joshua, chapter 3 and 4, on the banks of the River Jordan. After 40 years in the desert, they were at last on the cusp of a great moment of destiny for them as a people.

At last, they were about to go forward, to advance, according to God's plan and his purpose for them, to fulfil the promise that God had given to Abraham all those hundreds of years before.

Now, don't misunderstand. I'm not for a minute suggesting, really, that there's a parallel between the people of Israel then and our congregation here in the year 2007. Let's not have any delusions of grandeur.

Or let's not have a misplaced sense of biblical theology. God isn't, of course, speaking directly to us, is he? In the words that he addresses to Joshua and to the people on the banks of the Jordan River.

If we tried to interpret the Bible a little bit like that, I suppose we might conclude that what we need to do when the foundations start to get dug up here is to go down into the middle, send 12 people and bring out some stones and make a new memorial right at the front door, a cairn, as it were, at the front of the church when we come back in.

[2 : 27] Well, that would be a bit silly, wouldn't it? And I'm sure the council wouldn't allow it anyway. No, of course not. But obviously, these words are written for us. That's very plain, isn't it, when we read the New Testament.

In fact, it's explicit in Romans chapter 15, verse 4, where Paul says that whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction. That through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

Well, we might not be the Israelites on the brink of the Jordan, but we are a congregation of God's people on the brink of a momentous phase in our life together. And I don't know about you, but I, for one, certainly feel in need of endurance and hope.

Don't you? Well, the good news is that this account is written for us, for our instruction, for our encouragement, so that God may give us just that, endurance and hope, as we look to him to lead us forward together.

And that's why the account, as we have it in the Bible, is written in the way that it is, because, of course, it relates history, it relates what happened all those years ago. But it's much, much more than that.

[3 : 37] It's revelation, isn't it? It's words about God himself. And that's why it has something to say to us today, all these years later. Because this God is our God.

He hasn't changed. And what will give us encouragement, and endurance, and hope, more than anything else in the world, is to learn more about our God.

To learn more about how he leads his people so wonderfully in their kingdom mission, as they follow him in obedient faith. And you see, even as we read this story, we can see that God does what he does, and he does it the way that he does it, so that in doing these things, he can reveal things about himself to his people.

That he can show them things about himself that will fill his people with endurance, and encouragement, and hope. And that's a recurring theme, if you look just at the text itself.

Look at verse 4. They're told that they're to follow the ark in a certain way, aren't they? In order, says God, that you may know the way that you should go. Verse 7.

[4 : 47] God says to Joshua, he's going to exalt him again, so that they may know that I am with you. Verse 10, he says to the people, here's how you will know that the living God is among you.

Chapter 4, verse 6. That he set up the stones, that this may be a sign among you, so that you can tell your children what it means. Same again in verse 22 of chapter 4.

Then shall you let your children know about the exploits of this God. Verse 24, finally, so that all the people of the earth shall know. You got the message?

God wanted his people then, and the writer, by recording this, wants us, who are reading it today, to realize that the whole point of this story is so that we will know things about the Lord our God.

So that we'll know about what he's like, and about what he does, and about how he works with his people. At a moment of destiny, at a moment of challenge, and change, and advance, in any story of God's people, above all, what God wants his people to know is more things about him.

[6 : 00] Because that's the way, and the only way to real endurance in our service. That's the way to solid hope. So then, as we, as a congregation, stand on the brink of a great adventure, what does God want us to know more surely and more solidly about himself as we read these chapters tonight?

Well, it's a long account, isn't it? And of course, there are lots and lots of things that could encourage us here. And as I've studied it this week, I have to tell you, I've been immensely encouraged myself, personally, as I've looked at these words.

But let me suggest tonight just three key things that I think God cannot allow us to miss. And he wants us to grasp about himself.

He wants us to recognize, first of all, his sufficient word. And he wants us to remember, above all, his sovereign work. And he wants us also to rejoice in his saving witness.

Let's just look at these three things in turn and see how the inspired writer, moved by the Holy Spirit, writes so as to highlight these things so clearly for us that we just can't miss them. First then, the sufficient word of God.

[7 : 12] God wants us to recognize that his people are led by the gospel alone. That is, God wants us to learn that he is present with his kingdom people and that they prosper and that they fulfill their destiny in his hands when it is his sufficient word that is honored and given its rightful place in their midst by leaders and by the people alike.

That is, when they recognize that they are a people led by the gospel of God alone in all their ventures. Now that message, I think, comes across loud and clear right through this passage and we can see it, can't we, in the prominence that's given to the place of the Ark of the Covenant.

I'm sure you noticed that, didn't you, as we read through the passage. It keeps recurring again and again. Seventeen times in all in this story we hear about the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth.

First of all, it's there in verses 3 to 6. You can see it in chapter 3 where a great story is set by ensuring that the people can see clearly at every stage that they're being led by the Ark of the Covenant.

Look at verse 4. You see they're told not to crowd too closely. Why? Well, they're to stand back so that everyone can see the Ark. So that everyone can see so clearly that they know that they're being led in everything by the Ark of the Covenant of God.

[8 : 44] And as you read through the story you see that indeed it is the Ark of the Covenant of God from start to finish that leads the whole venture. Chapter 4 verse 18 says that only when the priests who are carrying the Ark of the Covenant came up out of the River Jordan did the waters at last return.

Now what is all the symbolism of this leading of the Ark of the Covenant? Well, I think it's very plain. The Ark of the Covenant represents, doesn't it, the presence of the living God, the Lord of all the earth, right in the midst of his people.

But God's presence is mediated through his word of covenant faithfulness. That's what the Ark carried, isn't it? God's covenant word.

Do you remember? Back in Deuteronomy 4 Moses says, he declared to you on the mountain his covenant and he wrote it on two tablets of stone. And those are the two tablets that were put in the Ark.

Hence its name, the Ark of the Covenant, the living word of a gracious covenant God, the word of the gospel, if you like. And that is what leads God's people in this venture.

[10 : 00] That's the way God presences himself among his people so that, as verse 4 says, you may know the way that you're to go. When the word of the true covenant gospel of God is honored, when that word is given its right position of leadership among God's people, where God's word is given its rightful authority and where God's people have a right attitude of heart, where they consecrate themselves, as verse 5 says, where they commit themselves to obey God's covenant word and to be faithful to the leadership of his gospel in all their doings.

That's the way to God doing wonders among his people when they recognize that they are a people who are led by the sufficient word of God, by the gospel of God.

Now that may not always be very easy. In fact, of course, it requires trust, it requires faith, doesn't it? So you look at verse 10, here's how you shall know that the living God is among you.

And what does it amount to? Well, you have to obey and then see. Do you see verse 13? It's when your feet actually get into the water and get wet. And not until then that the waters are going to recede.

You see? Trust and obey God's word. And then you'll see that God's word is indeed sufficient. It can be trusted.

[11 : 28] His gospel is true. Now, how do you reckon those priests felt as they stepped out into the waters of the Jordan? Well, I should think they were pretty nervous, don't you?

But they did. And they did indeed see a wonder because they were led by the gospel of God. They trusted his sufficient word and they obeyed his word.

And you know, friends, the book of Joshua is one of the very few places in the Old Testament scriptures where God's people did actually achieve their destiny under God.

It's very striking, isn't it, when you read the history of Israel? Almost always they're coming up way, way short. By and large, in the book of Joshua, they did achieve what God asked them to do.

They entered the land. They took the land. And the writer wants us to see why that is the case. Because the leaders of God's people heard and obeyed God and because the leaders of God's people passed on God's word to his people and they heard and obeyed and followed obediently the message of the gospel.

[12 : 37] Again, that's a recurring pattern that you see all the way through. I'm sure you noticed it again. Look at chapter 3, verse 7. The Lord said to Joshua. And what does Joshua do, verse 10?

Joshua says to the people. It's there again in chapter 4, verse 1. The Lord said to Joshua. And the same again. He passes it on and the people obey.

And the third time in chapter 4, verse 15. The Lord said to Joshua, command the priests. And they all did exactly in accordance with the command of the Lord.

You see, God reveals his covenant word of truth and his people are led by that sufficient word. It's a picture, isn't it? Of a healthy, believing community.

Where the leaders are standing firm on God's covenant. Where they're led by the gospel. where they're standing on the gospel. Where they keep the gospel word of God right at the center of everything.

[13 : 38] Chapter 4, verse 10. Just like the priests in the middle of the river Jordan standing, holding the ark of God. And that is the job, isn't it?

Of every Christian leader in every capacity. To keep the gospel visibly central in absolutely everything. In absolutely every venture. But of course, not just the leaders.

It was the people also. They were consecrated. They were committed to obey in a practice the priorities of the revealed word of God. No just lip service. And that's an abiding truth, isn't it?

All God's people's ventures in life must be led by the gospel. God's covenant word is sufficient. It tells us what our life is for. It tells us how our lives are to be lived.

It tells us why we do what we do. And we're not to doubt his gospel word. We're to obey him and we're to trust. And God's presence is with his people when they are truly led by his gospel word.

[14 : 43] And that is an abiding message for us to understand. Even when it might seem rather feeble. Isn't it interesting? There's no pillar of cloud or fire any longer, is there?

You can bet your bottom dollar that there were people among the crowd, among the people then who were saying to the leaders, well look, don't we need the signs and wonders that we used to have? How are we going to know God's with us if we don't have the great manifestations of power like in Moses' day?

But no, God says the leadership of the covenant of my promise as evidenced by the ark of the covenant is enough.

That's how I'm going to lead you from now on. My word is sufficient. I've given you my covenant. You can trust me. It's hard, isn't it, when the path ahead really looks very, very far from being clear to trust in God's word.

These people went up and they faced a raging torrent of a river. Yes, you can trust God's word to do his work even then. If you're led by the gospel of God then the Lord will do wonders among his people.

[15 : 52] So, friend, how do we know the way that we should go as we enter new ground together as we go away that we've not passed before? Well, verse 4 is the answer, isn't it?

We make sure that we can see that the ark is going before us. In other words, we make sure that we have always a clear gospel perspective. We let the demands of the covenant gospel of God dictate the way and then we trust and we obey.

And that's why in our building redevelopment we've sought to ensure that the gospel has led the way at every stage. And we must continue to be led by the very same concerns.

We mustn't be distracted by anything else. But if we do that then we can trust that God's presence will go before us as he has always gone before us to lead the way.

And when somebody says to you, well, what are you going to do in this new building? What exactly are you going to have? What great new attractions will you be having? Well, the answer is very, very simple.

[16 : 56] Well, there won't be anything new. There'll just be more of the old. There'll just be more ways and more opportunities to tell people the gospel. There'll just be more ways and more opportunities to teach people the word of the living God.

Because that's what our task is. to recognize that God's word is sufficient. And so we know that what we're to do is to maximize our sharing of that word.

And that's why we're going this way and that's why we can be confident that we're going the right way. Just like the Apostle Paul, do you remember in Acts chapter 19 when he was in Ephesus? He didn't need any blinding special revelation to know that he needed to move to change venue from the synagogue next door to the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

He had to do it because he knew he had to get a better hearing for the gospel. That's exactly why we're doing what we're doing. So let's recognize that we are people who must be led by the gospel of God at every stage and by the gospel alone.

But second, there's another emphasis here that's very, very clear and it's on the sovereign work of God. God wants us to remember that we are a people who are liberated by his grace alone.

[18 : 15] That is, God wants us to learn that he is present with his people to prosper them when it's his sovereign work that is honoured and proclaimed in their midst. That is, when they remember and when they never ever forget that they are people liberated by the grace of their God alone.

We've seen how prominent the place the ark plays in this account. But another thing I'm sure you couldn't miss as we read through it was the very central place given to something else, the matter of these twelve stones.

In fact, as you read the account it can be quite hard to work out exactly what's going on when and it can seem a little bit confused that is until you realise that the writer has deliberately ordered this account so as to give very special prominence to this business of the stones and their purpose.

It took me a few times reading through the passage just to get the hang of it. I just managed to work it out for myself when I turned to Dale Ralph Davis' book and it was the very first thing that he saved myself some time but it's good to puzzle over the text yourself because it makes you believe it a bit more.

But look, I want you to see yourself as well. See how he draws attention to these stones. We get a hint of it, don't we, in chapter 3 verse 12 when he says take 12 men from the tribes of Israel.

[19 : 33] Obviously there's going to be a job for these 12 men but then we're left hanging, we're not told what it is. We're told about the story of the crossing over and so on.

But then look how that gets interrupted at verse 17. Verse 17 sort of summarizes the whole thing. I tried to point that out to you. The priests and the ark are on the dry ground, all the people are passing over.

And that's like a bracket isn't it? You get it again at chapter 4 verse 10. Again a summary, almost the same words repeated. The priests standing in the midst of the Jordan and all the people going over.

And in between these two brackets, these two verses, the writer breaks off and he highlights for us the whole story of these stones.

Do you see in chapter 4 verses 1 to 10? It's really his way of doing what a modern magazine would do by putting a text box right in the middle of the page, you know, in a newspaper article or something.

[20 : 30] You've got the whole article and right in the middle you've got a highlight. With a sort of sub-story that draws your attention to it. And that's what he's doing here. So what is all this about these stones?

Well, the nub of it is there in chapter 4 verse 7, isn't it? It's to be a memorial forever. Something to mark this day forever and ever.

Never to be forgotten. Well, a memorial of what? Well, he tells us twice, doesn't he? in answer to the question from the children. When they say, what do these stones mean?

What are you to say? Well, verse 7 of chapter 4, you're to tell them that the Lord himself did do a wonder in bringing his people into the promised land.

When the ark of God's covenant went before them, the waters did indeed flee and they passed over. And verse 23 adds that the Lord did it to bring you to the land just as he had done it to rescue you out of Egypt through the Red Sea.

[21 : 31] That's what you're to remember. That's what you're to never ever forget, that it was the Lord your God who did it all. Not you, not anyone else, but the Lord your God.

You are a people liberated by the grace of God alone. He liberated you from your old life and he set you free and he liberated you for your new life.

And it was all by the work of his sovereign hand. Of course that was a very tangible reality, wasn't it, in the life of that generation, but it's also a pattern and a shadow of something far greater, isn't it?

They passed through an experience really in a way that was like death, wasn't it? A leaving behind of a whole old world. Behind the waters of the sea, behind the waters of the river.

And an entering in, almost like a resurrection into a whole new world. The hearts of the past, the rebellious hearts, the disobedient, the disgraced refusers of God's way, they were left behind.

[22 : 40] And new hearts, hearts renewed by God's word of covenant promise by his gospel. Hearts led by that promise, symbolized in the ark, they were led into a new land.

To a new existence with God. And these stones, they were to be a memorial forever and ever of what God alone had done in that great work of liberation.

And did you notice there were actually two sets of stones? One set, as verse 9 says, just briefly afterwards, that were to be left in the middle of the river where the priest had stood. and then the other set, as verse 8 describes, coming from the middle of the riverbed and being brought as a memorial to be set up at Gilgal and observed forever.

As if he's saying that the twelve tribes of the past are covered over, they're dead and buried, never to be seen again. And the twelve tribes of the future, where they're liberated forever into the promised land of God.

And it's all by the grace and the mercy and the power of God alone. And they're never, ever, ever to forget that it was God, the Lord alone, who liberated them.

[23 : 57] It was he alone who dried up the waters till they passed over. And that there was nothing but nothing that they themselves could have possibly contributed to their own deliverance.

In fact, the narrative goes out of its way, doesn't it, to point out to us, that. I'm sure you noticed that little detail. Do you see in verse 15 of chapter 3? It tells us that God did it at the most difficult and most impossible time of all.

Striking, isn't it? Because the tension builds up there. We're waiting for them to get into the river Jordan. Verse 14, 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.

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 into the brink of the water. And then all of a sudden we have these brackets. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest.

Breaks the flow completely, doesn't it? It just seems like it shouldn't be there. But why is it there? Well, it's to remind us, lest we forget, that God did this wonder at the most difficult possible time of year, when the Jordan was a raging torrent, the scholars tell us, perhaps a mile wide.

[25 : 16] Why on earth would God choose a time when the river was at its absolute worst for crossing, at a time that was so vital to his people's future? Why wouldn't he choose a time when the river was small and, well, he could just wade through and if something went wrong, well, he could swim for it?

Well, I guess it must be for the same reason as in Judges chapter 7 verse 2, God cut down Gideon's army to a handful, says God, lest Israel boast over me, saying my own hand has saved me.

I guess for the same reason as God chooses the foolishness of the cross, of the means of our liberation, so that no man may boast, so that none of us could ever think that we could contribute anything, anything at all to God's sovereign work.

So like the apostle Paul, we would simply have to say, far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And God wants us to remember that, doesn't he?

Especially at times of great moment, especially at times when we're seeking to do great things for God's name. because believers who really know that the cross of Christ is the sovereign work of God alone, and when we know that the source of our liberation, of our redemption, of our salvation is solely in God, then there'll be people who always look to God for help, who know that we need God for all of our needs, who know that all of our success, all of our progress, all of our achievements in his name depend solely on him, and not at all upon us.

[27 : 11] And so if we remember that, that we'll never grow arrogant, or self confident, or proud, or conceited, instead we'll be humbly asking him all the time, won't we, to work for us, and to work in us, because we know that without him we can do nothing.

You see, when Christians and when churches forget that, when they forget that they have to depend upon God's grace for every single advance, for every single need, do you know what that really means?

It really means they've forgotten the very heart of the Christian gospel, that our liberation is by the grace of God alone, from beginning to end.

So friends, as we go on with our building development, let's never forget that all that we are, and all that we have, and all that we can and hope to be, is dependent truly, and wholly, on the sovereign grace of God.

And you know, just as God made it so clear to the Israelites that it was all his doing by rescuing them in such a way that they couldn't possibly mistake his sovereign work, we shouldn't be surprised if in our venture of rebuilding God does the same for us.

[28 : 30] We shouldn't be surprised if he faces us with some things that just, in human terms, seem to be utterly impossible, just like crossing a river in mid-spate. And he may do that just to keep reminding us that we depend always on him and on his grace alone.

Maybe if we were perfect people, and had no doubts at all, and no wavering, then God could do things straightforwardly, and we'd still acknowledge him. But we're not, are we?

And so often he just does have to face us with the impossible, so that when he does open the way wonderfully, and do his work, we know, we know that it's him we must thank.

And he's done that already in some cases, hasn't he? In this project, and in many other things in our life as a congregation. Because he wants us to remember that we're a people liberated by God's sovereign grace alone.

But when we remember that, and when we remember that that entailed him giving up his very own son for us, then how will he not also, with him, give us all things by his grace, says Paul.

[29 : 51] So remember, we're liberated by his grace alone. But finally, as we close, don't miss the message of the very last verse of chapter 4.

Do you see it? It speaks about the purpose of the whole thing, doesn't it? A saving witness to God. God wants us to rejoice that we are a people who live for his glory alone.

That is, God wants us to remember that he is present with his kingdom people to bless them and to prosper them, when it's being a saving witness to God that is central to their lives at home and in the world.

When they rejoice that they are a people who live for the glory of God alone. What's the purpose of God's great redemption and adoption of his people?

And the purpose of his recording it and publicizing it as a memorial to be explained, to be proclaimed forever? Well, verse 24 says, it's 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.

[31 : 00] It's so that there may be a saving witness to God in all the world, that all peoples may join with God's people in rejoicing and worshipping the one true and living God.

That's why God does what he does for his people. That's why God saves his people, so that they may indeed glorify him forever, even as they make him known throughout the whole earth.

You see, along with a great history with God, comes a great responsibility from God. Isn't that true? And that's something that must be taken up in every new generation.

See, verse 19 is a very significant verse, isn't it? If you look back to Exodus chapter 12, you'll see that this verse tells us that it was 40 years to the very day since the Passover that God led his people through the river Jordan.

Here's a new generation, he's saying, and it's over to them. Because you see, you can't live in a past generation's faith, can you? Each generation has to rise to its own challenge under God.

[32 : 08] And it's exactly the same for us. It's remarkable, isn't it, that it's 200 years to the very year since the foundation stone of this building was laid this year.

And now it's our turn. Alex Bedford has often said to us, it's our generation's privilege of serving God here in the city centre in the 21st century.

And part of that privilege is that it's our generation that's called to make the necessary changes to this building for our future. Next year, when we, God willing, are back in this building and the building is finished, it will be exactly 200 years since the building was first opened.

Five generations. generations. Why is this building here? Well, verse 24 is our answer, isn't it? It's here so that all the peoples of the world may know and glorify our Lord, the God of all the earth, made known in Jesus Christ his Son.

And so that we may honour the Lord always and make him known to all the nations. Who would have believed if you'd said to them in 1808 that there would be people here in this building in the year 2008 from China and India and Nigeria and Korea and America and even England for goodness sake.

[33 : 26] Having found the Lord Jesus Christ and praising him and worshipping him and serving him along with native Glaswegians.

Who would have believed that? But that's why God has put these stones here. many more than 12 of them. But for the very same purpose.

And that's why God has put us here to make sure that this building fulfills its purpose. To be a place that is a standing witness down the generations for the glory of the God of all the earth and that the peoples of all the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty.

And we're to take up the responsibility in our generation. By consecrating ourselves. All of us together to play our part. Each of us together as one.

Notice the emphasis on the 12 tribes. It was all 12 tribes. Even we're told the two and a half tribes from the east side of the Jordan who often had seemed a little bit detached from the rest of the people of God.

[34 : 34] If you read in Numbers chapter 32 you'll see that Moses was really very suspicious of them. But they promised that when the time came they would stand with the people. Verse 12 of chapter 4 tells us that Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh they were there.

They were ready for war. They even were in the vanguard. Do you know as we stand on the brink there's opportunity for all of us.

Even I guess for those perhaps who have been a little bit detached from what's going on. All of us to be fully stuck in, fully committed together.

So that together all that is done among us will be a wonderful saving witness to God our Saviour. Among our fellowship here. But also among the peoples of the world that inhabit now this great city of ours.

We face a great challenge indeed we do. But friends the God of Joshua and the people of Israel is our God too. He promised never to leave or to forsake them.

[35 : 43] And he will never leave or forsake us. So let us hear his word. Let us recognize that we are to be led by the gospel alone. Let's keep the gospel's demands before us in everything that we do.

Let's remember that we are liberated by God's grace alone. And let us be dependent in prayer before him for everything that we need. And above all let us rejoice that we live for God's glory alone and let us determine together to be an abiding witness in the heart of this city.

For this generation and the next and the many generations to come until the Lord Jesus himself returns. So that as verse 24 says all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty.

You may fear the Lord your God forever. Amen.