

New Beginnings

Joshua 4:15-24

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, September 25th 2022

I. Reviewing the context (Josh 3-4)

I plan to finish chapter 4 today, but let me give a little bit of review before I do so. In chapter 3 we looked at how to recognize the difference between counterfeit faith and genuine God-given faith. We then looked at ten factors that function as fertilizer for faith or an atmosphere in which faith can grow strong. Wherever those ten factors are present, the whole community tends to have a strong faith. Then we looked at the specifics of what it looks like to walk by faith in the nitty gritty of real life. In chapter 4 we saw the connection of memorials and how narrating a history of faith can stir up more faith. Memorials can function as faith-builders. For example, how many times has God stirred up a person's faith to attempt great things for God after reading a Christian missionary biography? Last week we saw how genuine faith inevitably moves a person to more and more faithfulness, and we examined the specifics of what faithfulness looks like. You can distinguish faith from faithfulness, but you cannot separate the two. Today we will be seeing how faith lets us close doors to stages in our life (however great those were) and to open doors to new triumphs of faith.

II. Closing the door through a miracle (vv. 15-18)

New beginnings often start by closing the door to something, and nostalgia can make people feel bad about that. Nostalgia can actually kill a person's faith to expect new things from God. Many people don't realize that. Strong nostalgia doesn't just learn from the past (that's a good thing); it permanently camps in the past. And the older we get, the easier it is for nostalgia to drag us away from faith. In later chapters we will see that Joshua and Caleb fought that tendency.

In these verses God was closing the door to retreat as they went through a new door that would soon force them onto the battlefield. But this was also a miracle that was never going to be repeated in their generation. That's OK. He would do *new* miracles in their future. But even this closing of the door was clearly God's will since it was a *miraculous* closing of the door. And in the first point I want to demonstrate that because it is a contested point, with some people explaining everything in terms of scientific processes.

A. It was at God's command (vv. 15-17)

We can see some evidences that this miracle came at God's command, not simply naturalistic causes - which tends to be the default interpretation of virtually all liberals and even many evangelical commentaries. Too many commentaries try to interpret these things simply in terms of a natural dam 18 miles north that resulted from a landslide and

stopped the waters for a day. But we've already seen an enormous amount of evidence that contradicts that theory and shows that the *stopping* of the waters was a miracle that cannot be explained by natural causes. Well, the same was true of the re-flowing of the water.

1. God's command to Joshua (v. 15)

Verse 15 says, "Then the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying..." This was not just going to be Joshua speaking. This miracle was in God's timing and by God's leading. It was caused by God.

2. God's prophetic command through Joshua (v. 16-17)

Of course, God's command was to be mediated through the prophet Joshua so that the people could hear God's Word and connect that Word to the miracle. That way there would be no mistaking what was happening. Verses 16-17:

16 "Command the priests who bear the ark of the Testimony to come up from the Jordan." 17 Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan."

What God said, Joshua said. While there are differing views on this, I believe that this fits the true definition of prophecy. Prophecy isn't just revelation to the mind, leaving it up to the individual to put it into his own words. That's kind of a Neo-Orthodox view. Hundreds of Scriptures call the words of Moses, Joshua, David, and others God's very words, and dozens of Scriptures say that God puts His words into the mouth of the prophet, not simply the mind of the prophet. We will no doubt look at this at some point in Joshua to counter liberal and neo-orthodox views of Scripture.

But here I just want to focus on the miraculous nature of the return of the water. It returned at the command of Joshua the prophet. This flowing of the river as before was just as much of a miracle as the wall of water that heaped up in the air was a miracle.

B. The ark's absence from the river made the river return (v. 18a)

And to make it crystal clear that it was God alone who had held that wall of water back, the ark stayed stationary in the middle of the river bed all day. And to make it clear that it was God who returned the waters, the waters started flowing the moment the ark left the river bed. The ark represented God's throne and His rule. God's presence in the river produced a miracle of the river drying up. God's leaving the river bed produced a miracle of the waters returning as before. If it had been a natural dam 18 miles away, there would have been even more water rushing through than before and a much wider spread of flooding. Engineering principles of hydraulics demand that there be more water than before. But God made sure that the waters came exactly as before. It's hard to explain that from any other vantage point than that of a miracle.

C. It was instantaneous (v. 18)

The third clue that this was a miracle is that it all happened instantaneously. They didn't have to wait for the water to come from Adam. Verse 18:

18 And it came to pass, when the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD had come from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet touched the dry land, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before.

Some have used the word for “dry land” as proof that there were pools of water lingering in what one commentary says was a muddy river bed, so the riverbed was not dry land. But that completely contradicts the context of several verses. For example, the exact same Hebrew word for “dry land” is used two times in Joshua 3:17 to refer to the river bottom that had instantly been made as dry as the land outside the river. Let me read that. Joshua 3:17 says,

Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground [same Hebrew word] in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground [the same Hebrew word again], until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.

In other words, the ground in the midst of the river that they walked over was just as dry as the ground outside the river. That was a miracle. In our passage, God miraculously *reverses* that miracle. The wording of chapter 4:18 is emphasizing the fact that the moment the priests carrying the ark stepped out of the former dry-ground river bed, the river bed was no longer dry land and only where they were now stepping was now dry land. It was an instantaneous difference between dry and wet. And the literal rendering of the Hebrew says that the waters returned to the place where they had previously walked and overflowed its banks as before. OK, enough said on its miraculous character. We dealt with that quite a bit on a previous Sunday.

D. A possible reason why God closed the door

But *why* did God do it this way? *Why* did He make the crossing at the worst flood season, and *why* did he miraculously close the door? I have suggested other reasons in the past, but let me suggest one more. I believe God did this miracle to close the door to going back. Until the waters abated in a few weeks, there was no going back for at least the cattle, carts, and children. They were committed to staying on the dangerous side of the Jordan River. They were now committed to the conquest.

And God often does this with us. We may not recognize the closed door until after we have stepped out in obedience to the Lord's call, but we look back and realize, “OK! There's no changing my mind now. I'm committed.” In hindsight we can see the truth of Revelation 3:7, where God gave encouragement to the struggling church of Philadelphia. God said,

“These things says He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’”

I love that expression. We don't need to get stressed about closed and locked doors because the good God who loves us is doing that closing. God closed a door to ministry when Paul was thrown into prison. But Paul knew that if one door was closed, there would be another door to ministry opened up. And that was exactly what happened. Later he saw that God

had opened a door for ministry to the guards who were chained to him (a captive audience to the Gospel), and through those guards to other guards, and before you knew it, even some in Caesar's household were making profession of faith. If God had not closed the door by throwing Paul in prison, some of those people in Caesar's household may never have been able to hear the Gospel. So Paul said that He was a prisoner of the Lord. It wasn't Rome alone who closed the prison door and locked it. No, he was a prisoner of the Lord. We can trust that God has something good when He either miraculously or providentially closes doors.

But it also encourages us to not get slowed down by nostalgia. Kathy and I were looking through old pictures of some of the amazing things God did when we were at the Davenport house. In some ways we miss the 14 years of having international students live with us. It was a blessed time of giving and seeing God's grace and seeing very unique miracles. But when God closed those doors after 14 years, He immediately opened other ministry opportunities. And when He closed the door on Davenport altogether, He has transitioned us into new things. We go with the flow.

It's easy to be so nostalgic about the cool things of the past that we wish we could go back. We dwell on it too much. But faithfulness calls each of us to press into the new that God *has* opened the door to. These Israelites might have wished they could experience the manna again. They had miraculously gotten manna every day for forty years. But Joshua 5:12 says that God stopped the daily provision of manna when they went into Canaan. They might have wished that they could experience the parting of the waters again, but that was a ministry now closed and God was opening new ministries. Though we should appreciate the past and learn from the past (and that is one of the purposes of memorials), we should not *camp out forever around the past* but be willing to press into the new open doors that God has given. So don't miss the lesson of the closed doors. God closes doors for a good reason.

III. Opening the door through a new Exodus (vv. 19-24)

But in verses 19-24 we have the opening of the door through what the text clearly styles as a new Exodus similar to the Exodus out of Egypt. In fact, he explicitly compares it to the Exodus and the Red Sea crossing.

A. The significance of the timing = Abib 10 (v. 19 with Ex. 12:3)

First of all we have the timing given to us in verse 19. "Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho." According to Exodus 12:3, the tenth day of the first month was the day that a lamb would be selected for each household to be able to celebrate the Passover in four days. So it is a hint of the coming Passover in chapter 5, verse 10. But this is also one of several hints that connect this whole event with the Exodus out of Egypt.

B. The significance of the place = Gilgal (v. 20 with 5:4-12)

The next hint is given in verse 20: “And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal.” Gilgal was the first of three religious bases that Israel would keep coming back to during Joshua’s lifetime. The second one was Shiloh (18:1) and the third was Shechem (24:1). But Gilgal was where an entire nation would be circumcised shortly, and where the first Passover would be celebrated by this circumcised generation. In chapter 9 a sanctuary and an altar would be built here for the Lord. But the name itself is explained in chapter 5, verse 9. Once Israel was circumcised Joshua says, “This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you,” and the text goes on to explain, “Therefore the name of the place is called Gilgal to this day.” Mentioning Gilgal here is anticipating that theology. Gilgal means rolling away. The fact that they were uncircumcised made them similar to the Egyptians,¹ and when the connection to Egypt had been completely rolled away from them, they were ready to do what an Israel should do. The previous Exodus was incomplete since the people lacked faith and constantly wanted to go back to Egypt. But with that door closed and a new door of opportunity opened, Egypt had been rolled away.

In the same way, most of us have one or more points in our life that show a major break with the past. It may be our conversion, or a later commitment of our life to the Lord, or some traumatic event that forced us to trust God. Learn to rejoice in those closed doors and those new beginnings. Don’t get bitter over closed doors.

C. The significance of the instructions = future generations (vv. 21-23 with Deut. 4:9-24; 5:2-5)

But even the instructions that are given here show that this was a time of new beginnings, not a repeat of the miracles of the past. Verse 21 affirms that they aren’t the last generation:

Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: “When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What are these stones?’

These questions imply the need to pass on the doctrines of the faith to the next generation - something we have already looked at. But right now I just want to emphasize that this means there will be a next generation. He is focusing on new beginnings. And the next two verses indicate the responsibility to pass on the redemptive history God had performed:

22 then you shall let your children know, saying, “Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land”; 23 for the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over...

¹ Many commentaries claim that the Egyptians and Canaanites were circumcised, but see Jeremiah 9:25-26; Judges 14:3; Ezek. 32:24-32; etc.

D. The explicit comparison = Red Sea crossing (v. 23)

Notice in that last verse the explicit comparison to the crossing of the Red Sea - “as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over...”

So all of this is showing the new beginnings that Israel had. They had left their old life behind, had been resurrected to a new life, and now had new purposes in life.

IV. God’s purposes for this new beginning (vv. 21-24)

And for the remainder of the sermon I want to look at those purposes. God had purposes for that generation, for future generations, and for the world at large.

A. God’s purposes for Israel (vv. 21-23)

Let me back up to the verses we just went over and give six purposes for that generation of Jews. And we can see these in verses 21-23.

1. First, these verses call upon Israel to instruct their children in the faith. Verse 22 says, “you shall let your children know, saying...” and he gives a sample recitation of their redemptive history. The parents were called to teach their children. Of course, this was not new. Deuteronomy 4, Deuteronomy 6, and so many other passages call upon each generation to teach their children. Homeschooling is a wonderful tool to help ensure covenant succession. It’s not the only tool. But we are motivated to pass the faith on when we realize that God has promised that covenant succession *is* possible. In fact, the ideal level of covenant succession according to Deuteronomy 7:9 and Psalm 105:8 is to have a thousand generations of descendants who love the Lord. That’s astounding! That’s miraculous! But hey, we serve a God of miracles. But that won’t happen automatically. It is going to require faith in God’s promises and personal discipleship or training of our children as mandated in verses 21-23.
2. A second purpose of these memorial stones was to alert the Jews to the danger of forgetting what God had done in our lives. We tend to be forgetful. We talked about that two weeks ago when we looked at memorials, so I won’t focus on that right now. But we *do* need to think of creative ways to jog our memories and keep God’s work from the past alive in our memory. And some of you have actually started implementing that sermon on memorials in your homes.
3. Third, these verses warn us to not get so busy in our important endeavors of conquest that we become spiritually myopic. Myopia is nearsightedness. These memorial stones called the Israelites to not just look at their own generation up close, but to look beyond their own generation and be thinking of future generations, and encouraged future generations to think of past generations, and encouraged both to be thinking of God’s glory being lifted up in the world. The memorial was a call to stop being short-sighted and self-absorbed. It was a call to

have a much bigger kingdom vision.

4. Fourth, these verses called that generation to already be preparing for future generations *before those children would even arise*. This is not just praying for them before they are born (that's a good thing), but preparing to *have* children and to *teach* them. We must have a vision for future generations and multi-generation strategies. Don't be caught off guard when the children come. Prepare yourselves to be ready.
5. Fifth, our generation needs to know covenant history or it will be lost by the next generation. Some people don't like history, but covenant history must be passed on. And I am so grateful that we can do it more easily through books.
6. Sixth, since Israel would regather at Gilgal for religious festivals from time to time, these stones were a call to plan for times of refreshing; to anticipate them. Modern equivalents might be conferences, vacations, prayer-and-planning retreats, or continuing education training like the Foxes and Duffs are doing), or family reunions. It is good to get away from the rat race of world conquest and regroup and refresh. Our kids and their families are going to be doing that starting tomorrow. So those are six purposes that God had for the current generation. These purposes help us to step into our new beginnings with energy and enthusiasm and purpose.

B. God's purposes for the future generations (vv. 21-23)

Just from what we have already said, I think you can think of some purposes for the future generations. They will be similar. But let me list three *additional* purposes for future generations that jump out of the text:

1. First, verse 21 indicates that each generation needs to ask the previous generation for wisdom. They need to be hungry for learning. God is assuming that the children will want to know. He says, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come..." Civilization isn't built in one generation. It builds upon the wisdom inherited from multiple generations of the past. And when we cut ourselves off from the best of the previous generations, we cut ourselves off from sustained growth. Learn to ask lots of questions of the aged. Learn from the previous generations. Learn from their mistakes; learn from their successes. Build upon what they have already built.
2. Second, each generation should have a sense of curiosity. They ask, "What are these stones?" Now, it is true that curiosity can get us into trouble. Gary and I train the young men how to tame their curiosity and make sure it is not going in a sinful direction - such as clickbait. But curiosity can also be harnessed for taking godly dominion. Indeed, when rightly channeled, curiosity is a very powerful tool for research, scientific exploration, and other aspects of dominion.
3. Third, there are a number of indicators in the whole chapter that each generation is supposed to have a vision for the unity of God's people or what the confessions call

the holy catholic church. Now, let me clarify that Rome has abandoned the catholic faith, and its claim to being catholic is a false claim, and they are certainly not a *holy* catholic church. The church history of the first 1200 years stands as a rebuke to Roman Catholicism. Thus the Reformers refused to call them catholic, preferring to call them papists or Romanists. The Reformers were simply restoring the church to the true catholic faith. What do we mean by that? The true catholic church is the true church of the past, present, and future, wherever it may exist all over the world. In the same way, these verses have concern about the Israel of the past, the Israel of the present, and the Israel of the future. There are twelve stones, yet one memorial, even as there are twelve tribes, yet one body. Even the singular Hebrew word *goy* (גוֹי) that is used in verse 1 to describe the nation of Israel, shows this unity. Sadly, modern Protestants have lost this sense of continuity with the past, and as a result they are more easily tempted to enter the false unity of Rome or Eastern Orthodoxy. We can develop a better sense of our catholicity in several ways. We can read church history. We can read books on missions that describe the church all over the world. We can go to conferences at which many good denominations attend. We can pray for reformation of the whole church. These twelve stones were a reminder that tribalism or denominationalism shouldn't be taken too far.

C. God's purposes for the world (v. 24)

We'll end with verse 24, which shows God's purposes for the world. It says,

that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.

The immediate purpose was that all the nations of that time would know that God was the Almighty. But several commentaries have pointed out that the covenantal and absolute way this is worded makes this appear to be part of the typology of the whole book which points to Jesus and *His* kingdom. Just as all Canaan would be conquered with the sword, the Great Commission indicates that all nations will be conquered with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Bible. Hebrews 4 draws that typology out especially well with Jesus being the greater Joshua with the double-edged sword of the Spirit. So this may well be a prophetic symbolism of the evangelizing of the whole earth, which results in Israel itself coming to faith and fearing the Lord. But whether that is true or not, two purposes in this verse are clear:

1. Let the world see the hand of the Lord at work in your life. Don't hide His light under a bushel. If the world can go month after month and year after year not noticing any difference between your life and the life of pagans, you are failing to live up to the enormous privileges that you have in Christ. After all, Romans 8:11 says that the same Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is right now at work in your mortal bodies. Do you avail yourself of that Almighty power? This book will speak of the miraculous power that was at the disposal of Israel when it would ask in faith. James says that you have not because you ask not - or at least because you ask for selfish reasons rather than kingdom reasons. So the first purpose is to let the world see the hand of the Lord at work in their lives. Can the world see the power of God at work

in your life?

2. The second purpose was to develop fear within God's people - "that you may fear the LORD your God forever." The next verse (in chapter 5) talks about a different kind of fear. It says that the hearts of the Canaanites melted. But this was because Israel itself feared and revered the Lord and desired God's mission statement to be their own. When you are sold out to the Lord and you fear God more than you fear man, God delights in using you. Gordon Matties says,

The fact that the fear of the Lord belongs in a covenantal context here suggests that the desired response (and the meaning of "to fear") is complete allegiance, or "single-minded and exclusive loyalty" (Boling 1982: 187) to the Lord of all the earth (3:13; cf. 2:11).²

And in the same paragraph he says that this loyalty of Israel to fear the Lord will eventually result in the nations fearing God like Rahab did.³ Well, that sounds like conversion. So he holds to the view that this is part of the prophetic foreshadowing of the New Covenant's success. The fear of the Lord in the church will produce the fear of the Lord in the nations, which will in turn produce a heightened fear of the Lord in the church. It's at least worth considering.

In conclusion I would say that each of us should try to recognize God's work in closing doors and opening doors. Realize that God is always providentially leading you. Respond to that leading with excitement and faith knowing that if God is for you, who can be against you? Amen.

² Gordon H. Matties, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Joshua*, ed. Douglas B. Miller and Loren L. Johns (Harrisonburg, VA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2012), 99.

³ The full quote is: "The meaning of the confession, therefore, explodes dramatically in verse 24, where Joshua states the double hope that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty and that you may fear the LORD your God forever. This high point in the confessional instruction connects the people of v. 19 with all the peoples of verse 24 (Boling 1982: 186). We are reminded of Rahab's confession (2:9-11) and of her subsequent incorporation into Israel (cf. 6:25). She also "knows" what the Lord has done. The double theme of knowing and fearing in verse 24 also echoes the exodus narrative (cf. "know" in Exod 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; etc.; "fear" in 1:17, 21; 9:20, 30; 14:31). The narrative suggests that the peoples of the earth will, in and through Israel's storytelling confession, come to acknowledge God alone. Perhaps like Rahab they will make the same covenantal confession. Confessing the Lord's active presence in the past aims to generate active faithfulness in the present. The fact that the fear of the Lord belongs in a covenantal context here suggests that the desired response (and the meaning of "to fear") is complete allegiance, or "single-minded and exclusive loyalty" (Boling 1982: 187) to the Lord of all the earth (3:13; cf. 2:11)." Gordon H. Matties, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Joshua*, ed. Douglas B. Miller and Loren L. Johns (Harrisonburg, VA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2012), 98-99.