

A THRIVING RELATIONSHIP

Where Do We Go From Here? (Part 3) | Joshua 3 & 4

I

Have any of you used this COVID season to do a little extra housecleaning? Amy and I have done a lot of it. Since all three of our twentysomething boys are now living in other states and we were replacing some carpet, we finally got around to going through all the piles of stuff in their rooms. That was a project --- a sentimental, slow, and sometimes shocking experience! I don't know how many boxes of memorabilia we packed up or bags of stuff we threw away. But some things we just couldn't toss. This ROCK, for example. When I found it under a pile of junk, I picked it up, cradled it in my arms and remembered its story and what it meant.

Our son, Rush, was in his freshman year at Norwich University -- the nation's oldest private military academy -- when he participated in what's known as The Dog River Run. To you and me, the Dog River wouldn't seem like anything more than a country creek, but to every Norwich military student, it was a very important place... a defining place... the dividing line between being a mere plebe and rising toward the goal of becoming a true cadet.

The Dog River Run was a harrowing obstacle course and "formation" experience. The plebes were required to run down this creek while older students who stood on the banks taunted and tested them. The run included a lot of falling and crawling and getting back up again. It involved mud and sweat, pain and exhaustion, agonizing exercise and the constant temptation to give up. And you ran this gauntlet while carrying a rock. Not a pebble or stone, but a seriously heavy rock like THIS ONE... that our son Rush carried... and, as I discovered that day while cleaning his room, he'd kept.

Why do you suppose he kept it? Because it reminded him of the obstacles he'd had to overcome and the burdens he'd learned to carry -- a form of training that will be important as he serves overseas with the U.S. Army this year. But Rush told me this week that he'd kept it mainly because it was a touchpoint with the RELATIONSHIPS he'd formed. It was a reminder of his bond with all those other river runners on their common journey toward becoming adults -- people with the capacity to face serious challenges and yet THRIVE. Who of us, doesn't want to thrive? And who of us doesn't need enormously resourceful relationships to help us do it?

II

When we meet the Israelites in the Book of Joshua today, they are in the midst of a significant journey of their own. If you are just joining us today, the children of Israel are in the process of leaving behind the wilderness in which they had been wandering

for forty years and crossing over into a new land of great promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, a place where they will eventually settle down and make a new home. It will be on this new land that God will raise up a King named David and great prophets whose teaching about justice and the heart of God ring down to this very day. It will be there in the land of Canaan that amazing leaders like Deborah and Daniel will be born, and remarkable influencers like Ruth and Nehemiah will make their home. It will be there in the land we now call Israel that Jesus will come.

But that's getting ahead of the story. All of us know that no one just gets air-dropped into the Promised Land. You don't just get a renewed society or a fulfilling career or a great marriage or a wonderful character or a peak-conditioned body just magically conferred upon you. Most of the time, the way to such outcomes involves crossing some rivers and facing some obstacles. In one way or another, everyone who eventually finds a life of thriving, must make some version of the Dog River Run.

So... when we meet them in the Book of Joshua, the Israelites are standing at the edge of the Jordan River. They've been given their marching orders. Part of their orders are geographical ones: On behalf of God, Joshua says, we're going through that river into this new land. But the more important part of the orders are theological; they have more to do with doctrine than with direction. As Suanne reminded us last week, God says to the Israelites: **Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. (Joshua 1:7)**

God says the same to you and me: *If you want to thrive wherever you go, then follow the trail of my teaching. Use the map I've given you in my Word.* There's an old saying that if you meet someone with a Bible that's falling apart from longtime use you'll notice that they aren't. They aren't falling apart at all. On the contrary, they've usually got unusual moral clarity, spiritual confidence, and personal resilience. They know the path they're walking in life. No new administration in Washington can do as much to make our country prosperous and successful as a nation filled with people dedicated to walking the path marked out in this book.

What would it look like for you to make that a priority in 2021? Could you read one chapter of the New Testament every day, or even just five a week? Could you download a Bible app on your phone and let it read the chapter to you as you brush your teeth or drive in your car? Could you write one email? Write to us at help@christchurch.us and ask how you can get into a small group Bible study or one of our groups for middle and high school students. Ask how you can participate in one of the online groups we have older adults, women, men, or couples. It has never been more convenient to find companions to walk the trail God marks out for us in his Book. **Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. (Joshua 1:8)**

III

But there's one further secret to thriving in 2021 that I invite you to think about with me today. If you think about it, Joshua had to be more than a little bit nervous about the journey that lay ahead of him. I mean, in some ways, he was like a freshly inaugurated President. The mantle of responsibility for his nation's welfare suddenly weighed heavily on his shoulders. People were now looking to him to lead, to fix the problems, to steer them through the perils of the present and the unforeseen challenges ahead. Imagine what it would be like if YOU suddenly found yourself in the big chair in the Oval Office with the full weight of leadership on your shoulders.

You know, for me, one of the most memorable moments of this past week was watching three of the former U.S. Presidents standing together and expressing their availability to help the new President. Did you see that? Whatever your opinion of the administrations of Barack Obama, George Bush, and Bill Clinton, I'm guessing that if you sat in that Oval Office seat from whatever party, you'd be glad you had those guys FOR you and available to you. When you're in the hardest parts of the Dog River Run, my son told me, it means everything to know the quality of the people by your side. Who have you got by your side as you slosh through the water into this New Year? Who are the band of brothers or sisters making the journey with you? Do you know you can count on them? Do they know they can count on you? Tell them that. And if you don't have such a band, tell ME that and I'll help you find one.

But most of all, take heart from what Joshua was told at the moment of his inauguration as the new leader of Israel. GOD says: **As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. (Joshua 1:5)**. Now, this is an amazing statement because the writer of the biblical book of Deuteronomy ends his massive 34-chapter history with a definitive proclamation that never again will there be a leader like Moses – someone with whom God met face-to-face and did awesome deeds through. And yet, five verses later, God says, in effect: *"Oh, no, I'm not close to being done resourcing leaders."* **Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous [Joshua]. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9)**

In every age, we get fixated on human leaders: Moses, Thatcher, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, Merkel, Biden. Don't get me wrong, human leadership matters. The character and decision-making of human leaders – whether in homes, businesses, churches or governments – makes a difference for good or ill and usually both. But what matters MOST is the presence and power of GOD at work. And the wisest leaders – people like Washington, Lincoln or King – seem unusually aware of that, unusually dependent on that, unusually inclined to point to God as our greatest hope.

This is what made Joshua great as a leader. He knew how central and essential a relationship with God was for his own and his nation's thriving. So in Joshua chapter 3, as he's about to lead his people on the Dog River Run across the Jordan and into their future, he orders that the Ark of the Covenant be brought out and carried ahead of the people into the river. The Ark of the Covenant was the gilded wooden vessel that contained the tablets of the Law – the Ten Commandments – that God had given Moses to guide his people. If you've ever seen Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, then you know what I'm talking about. The Ark represented God's holy presence and stunning power with his people. The very sight of it lifted people's hopes.

THAT needs to be our focal point as we go into the future, says Joshua, in effect. If God is for us and with us, we can make it anywhere. We may face all kinds of trials. We may fall down and get wet and muddy and hurt. But we'll get up again and find the way forward if we keep lifting our eyes to Him – if we take courage and counsel from the most important relationship of all. That's true for you and me too.

I hope you'll go back and read chapter 3 for yourself, because what happens when the Ark is carried out into the river is simply amazing. Remember, the conclusion of Deuteronomy is this prediction that all the best days of God's presence and his powerful acts are past. They are finished with Moses. And no sooner does the Ark get out into the midst of the water, but a miracle like the parting of the Red Sea occurs and the waters of the Jordan separate, and the Dog River Runners of Israel suddenly find themselves walking across the riverbed on dry land.

Remember this: God is never done doing amazing things for those who love him and put their trust in him and answer the call to keep walking in the direction of his purposes. If you are a follower of Jesus, keep investing in your relationship with Him. Make it your number one passion and priority. Like that Ark that Joshua sent out first, put God first in your life – in your thoughts as you get up every morning and in your devotions during the week. Put him first in your finances. Put him first when you're handling difficult people or tempted to seek glory for yourself. Don't miss a week of worshipping him. Seize every opportunity this year gives you to serve Christ and point others to Him.

And if you don't have a relationship with God like I'm describing, then let TODAY be the start. Take a step into the water. Say, *"Jesus, from here on out, I am going to follow you. I am going to throw my lot in with these other river runners and see where you lead me."* If you're willing to do that, tell others in the CHAT or share with me or one of the other staff here that you've dedicated or rededicated your life today to having a THRIVING RELATIONSHIP with God.

As I come to a close today, I want to leave you with one last image from the Scriptures. Picture a crowd larger than you've ever seen on the Washington Mall – literally hundreds of thousands of people – walking across that dry riverbed and up onto the

shores of what will eventually prove to be the Promised Land. The Israelites aren't done with their battles and struggles, as I know we aren't either. But a new era of hope, a new season of God's mysterious and wonderful plan is beginning. And their human leader doesn't want them to forget the show of presence and power God just gave them. **So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you... So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. (Joshua 4:4-8)**

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground...' The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God." (Joshua 4:20-24)

My son took this stone from the river to remind him of the wonderful weight and strength of the relationships he formed in college and the courage that gave him to run into the future. Christ Church wants to be that kind of genuine community for you and for all of us. But Jesus is the greater Rock – the cornerstone and firm foundation -- upon whose love we build our lives. No one will ever care for you like Jesus already does. And wherever you go in this New Year, take hope and joy from this: His presence and power go before you and will be with you always, even to the close of this age (Mat 28:20).