

# Waiting on the Lord

## Joshua 3

*Pastor Tim Melton*

Back in Numbers 13 and 14 we read that the children of Israel had been led to the edge of the Promised Land. God had led Moses to send in 12 spies to search out the land. They had returned with stories of a great land that was truly a land of milk and honey as God had promised . . . but it was also filled with giants. 10 of the spies were convinced that the situation was hopeless. Their view infected the people of Israel, and the people rebelled against Moses and chose not to trust God and enter the Promised Land. Because of their unbelief, God declared that no one over the age of 20 would ever enter the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who had believed in God and had declared that God could deliver the children of Israel (Numbers 14:22-23).

That was 40 years ago. All of those who had been older than 20 had died during their years in the wilderness. And now after the long wait they once again had been led back to the edge of the Promised Land.

Moses had recently died, and Joshua, one of the two faithful spies, had now been appointed by God as their leader. As God had directed, Joshua led the people to camp on the banks of the Jordan River.

It was the flood season and the river was raging. It was out of its banks and appeared to be impossible to cross. But God had said to prepare the people, so that is what Joshua had done. Behind them was the wilderness, and before them, on the other side of the Jordan, lay the Promised Land. Now all they had to do was get 500,000+ men, their wives, their children, their livestock and their belongings, across the river . . . safely.

Across the river, several kilometers away awaited the impressive city of Jericho. That would be the next challenge, but for now the people were to camp here until the word was given to cross the river.

Joshua sent his officers throughout the camp to share the following instructions. In three days they were going to pass over the Jordan River. In preparation they were told to prepare their provisions and

consecrate themselves. On the third day, when the people saw the ark of the covenant being carried by the priests towards the river, they would gather their things and follow.

The ark of the covenant was the holiest of objects for the Israelites. Inside the ark were the two stone tablets that held the Ten Commandments that had been received by Moses. Also, in the ark was a golden pot of manna as a proof of God's provision in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4). The Ark also contained Aaron's almond rod. In Numbers 17:1-13, others had challenged Aaron as a leader and his descendants as the priests. God told Moses to have the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel each bring a staff. They were laid in the tabernacle. The next morning Moses entered and found that during the night the staff of Aaron had budded, bloomed and bore almonds. In this way Aaron and his descendants were confirmed as the priests of Israel.

On top of the golden Ark of the Covenant were two angels facing each other. The area between the two angels was called the mercy seat. This was the sacred place where God dwelt amongst His people (Exodus 25:22). In this place the presence of God was "seated" and from here mercy and pardon were given each year when the High Priest poured out the blood of the animal sacrifice, on the Day of Atonement, in the Holy of holies.

As they followed the Ark of the Covenant and kept it in view, their guide and their confidence would be the presence of God.

The children of Israel had never been this way before. It was a time of utter uncertainty and fear. Based on the past, they knew they must believe because unbelief could lead them back to the wilderness. At the same time, before them lie Jericho and all the mighty peoples of Canaan. How could they possibly conquer this land and make it their own?

With this in mind God met them in the midst of their unbelief. God told Joshua to speak these words to the people: ***"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 peoples of Canaan . . . When the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord 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 a heap."*** (Joshua 3:10, 13)

The day came. The priests picked up the Ark of the Covenant. The people followed. The river raged. It must have been a moment full of emotion. Would it actually work? Would they finally leave the wilderness and enter the Promised Land? Would the presence of God make a difference?

As the priests stepped into the edge of the river . . . the river stopped.

Joshua 3:15-16 recounts the event in this way: ***"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 . . . 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."***

God could have led His people to the banks of the Jordan river at any time during the year, but He chose the springtime, when the melted snow from Mount Hermon rushes downstream towards the Dead Sea. For the people it must have seemed like a problem, but to our Creator God it was an opportunity. An opportunity to show His glory and to grow the faith of His people.

The people successfully crossed over and camped in a place called Gilgal, to the east of Jericho. The Lord instructed Joshua to recruit one man from each tribe to enter into the riverbed and take a stone from the place where the priests who held the ark of the covenant stood. These twelve stones were brought to the camp and Joshua set them up. They were to serve future generations as a reminder of what God had done for His people in this place.

Joshua 4:18 then states, *“And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before.”*

V. 24 then gives a reason for this miraculous work of God: *“So that all the people of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD (Yahweh) is mighty, that you may fear the LORD (Yahweh) your God forever.”* It was done so that the nations would glorify God and that an awe-inspiring fear and faith would be placed in the hearts of His people.

This is the pattern we see in scripture. God works for His glory and for our good. Now back to this sermon's theme, “Waiting on the Lord.”

These children of Israel had been waiting, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Have you ever wandered in the wilderness? Maybe it was a spiritual wilderness of doubt and apathy. Or maybe an emotional wilderness of bitterness, depression or anxiety. Or maybe a physical wilderness of cancer, or Covid-19, or not being able to have a child.

Most of us have passed through times of wilderness and wondered if it would ever end. This is where the children of Israel had been . . . for 40 years. And now to make it worse God brings them up to the raging river's edge and has them sit there for three days. What a challenge of faith.

God's goal was not for them to have a pleasurable, comfortable life. His goal was to give them the best gift He could, which was Himself. God brought them face to face with a situation that gave them no choice but to put their hope in Him. Many times that is what waiting is. It is a crisis of belief that exposes our hearts and drives us nearer to God.

But God did not leave them helpless. Their confidence was first and foremost in the fact that Yahweh God was with them. It is true for us as well. Of us it is no longer expressed by the Ark of the Covenant, but by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. We are the temple of God. God will never leave us or forsake us. His presence is our confidence, even when we are faced with the darkest of days or what seems to be an unending wilderness.

When their future was unknown they obeyed what they knew. They prepared their belongings. They consecrated themselves. They watched for the Ark of the Covenant to move. It was an active waiting. As they obeyed what they had already been told, it prepared them for what was to come.

What in your life are you waiting for at this time? What do you know needs to be done in the meantime? What does an active waiting look like for you? As Christians we know we are to be a people of God's Word. We know we are to be a people of prayer. We know we are to love others. Maybe in your situation there are other steps that God wants you to do in the midst of the waiting. Pray for God's help and prepare yourself for whatever God will bring your way. (Example: Joseph's faithfulness in Potiphar's house. David's faithfulness as a shepherd. Ruth's faithfulness as a harvester.) In each of these stories their faithful, active waiting prepared them for what lie ahead.

In the midst of our waiting, we must embrace the fact that God works for His glory and our good. It may feel excruciating to wait any longer, but we must ask God for patience, faith and peace.

Philippians 4:6-7 instructs us, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.<sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

What more could God do to convince us of His unconditional love and sovereign care than sending His precious Son to die for us? Pray that God would grant you faith in His goodness. That we could grow to wait on the Lord like a child who expectantly waits for Christmas morning. Waiting does not have to be something that we dread. As we trust in God as the coordinator of our future, we can look forward to what lies ahead confident that it is for God's glory and for our good.

Kay Arthur, in her book *As Silver Refined*, explains how a simple refiner of metals in Jesus' day would build a fire and take the raw metals and begin to heat them and work with them. The goal would be to remove every impurity until only pure silver remained. It would be an all-day procedure. Not something he could walk away from. It demanded his constant attention, minute by minute, to wipe away the dross and impurities that would rise to the surface. The heating, the cooling, the wiping. The waiting and watching. Hour after hour, until he began to see his reflection. If it was still blurry, it needed more fire, more wiping away impurities, more cooling, more heating, until finally he would see it. His clear perfect reflection in the purest of silver. In our lives it is the same way. Day at a time. Moment by moment. Struggle by struggle. Jesus is refining us so that He may see more and more of Himself in us. That is the goal. Until we see Him face to face.

That is what waiting is. A time of refining, where the presence of God becomes the peace and hope of our lives. Today may we humble our hearts before Him, that He may refine us like never before. Please sing this song with me as a prayer:

*Purify my heart,  
Let me be as gold and precious silver.  
Purify my heart,  
Let me be as gold, pure gold.*

*Refiner's fire,  
My heart's one desire  
Is to be holy;  
Set apart for You, Lord.  
I choose to be holy;  
Set apart for You, my Master,  
Ready to do Your will.*

*Purify my heart,  
Cleanse me from within  
And make me holy.  
Purify my heart,  
Cleanse me from my sin, deep within.*

*Refiner's fire,  
My heart's one desire  
Is to be holy;  
Set apart for You, Lord.  
I choose to be holy;  
Set apart for You, my Master,  
Ready to do Your will.*

### **Discussion questions:**

1. What about this sermon did you find most interesting?
2. Why do you think people find it so difficult to wait?
3. What was so significant about the Ark of the Covenant being with the people?
4. What are you waiting for at this time, and what is a form of active waiting in that situation?
5. How would you describe that “God works for His glory and for our good”?
6. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon and this discussion?
7. What do you think God wants you to do about that? How can we pray for you?