

# Faith at the decisive moments of life

## *Joshua and the crossing of the Jordan*

There are some decisive moments in life when faith is tested by situations that humanly seem impossible to overcome. It could be an illness, the loss of a loved one, situations of injustice, economic difficulties, a difficult decision.

The text of Joshua, chapters 3 and 4, presents us one of these decisive moments. The crossing of the Jordan was humanly an insurmountable obstacle: three million people had to cross the river which at that time of year «overflows all its banks» (Josh. 3:15 ESV) and reaches a width of one kilometer by three meters deep. It was a **humanly impossible** task, but also essential if they wanted to enter the Promised Land.

The crossing of the Jordan contains rich symbolism. For some it represents death, as it gives us the entrance to the Promised Land, heaven. Bunyan describes it in this sense in one of the most memorable passages of *“The Pilgrim”*. For others, it is a symbol of conversion that gives us access to the blessings of God in Christ Jesus. Sin, symbolized by the Jordan, formed an insurmountable barrier, a barrier that was opened through Jesus Christ.

In a broader sense, **we all have** one or several **Jordan crossings** throughout our lives, moments when faith plays a decisive role. But what is faith? The text shows us this in a very practical way: faith is **an encounter and a dialogue** between God and man, an encounter and a dialogue founded on mutual love and in which each party gives and receives something as it should be in every relationship of love.

### **A people that trust**

Let's see, first of all, what God expected of the people at that decisive moment. There are three attitudes that underpin faith: trust, obedience and holiness. In fact, they are consecutive, one naturally leads to the other.

#### **1. Full trust**

Faith is impossible without an element of trust, a trust defined as «the **assurance** of things hoped for, the **conviction** of things not seen» (Heb. 11:1 ESV). Every love relationship requires trust. Trust is the fertile soil in which love grows. Lack of trust is a poison that destroys love.

Biblical faith is not a blind trust, a leap into the void. It has a triple

foundation:

- **What God did** in the past: **His faithfulness**. It is no coincidence that the verb used most often in the Old Testament in the imperative mood is “remember”.
- **What God will do** in the future: **His promises**. «Then Joshua said to the people: “tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you”» (Josh. 3:5 ESV).
- **What God is: His power**. God is «Lord of all the earth» (Josh. 3:11 ESV). The God who is near is also the omnipotent God.

## 2. Obedience from the heart

Trust leads to obedience: «the people hurried and crossed over» (Josh. 4:10 NKJV). They fulfilled to the letter everything that God commanded them.

Questioning the Word of God is the first step to drowning in the crossing of the Jordan, the embryo of all spiritual shipwreck. It was a repeated error in the history of the people of Israel and it has also been so in the history of the Church. Almost all periods of decline and apostasy have started from this point: questioning, relativizing the words of God, lowering the authority of the Scriptures. This time it was not like that: «the people hurried and crossed over».

The obedience of faith is not born out of **obligation** (legalism), **but of conviction**. Paul describes it as «*obedience from the heart*» (Rom. 6:17 ESV). God speaks to them and explains in detail what they must do to successfully cross the river: «Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God» (Josh. 3:9 MEV). This is always the case: *God does not impose* but rather *exposes* and man is free to follow or not, to obey or disobey.

God's words to the people –God's Word to us today in the Scriptures– are the basis of our trust and the guide for our obedience.

## 3. Holiness

Trust leads to obedience and obedience leads to holiness. It is the third feature of faith. Before the great event the people had to prepare: «Sanctify yourselves» (Josh. 3:5 NKJV). And it does not refer to a ritual preparation (there was no time for that), but a spiritual one; the people had to look to God, seek the presence of God through **meditation and prayer**.

The holiness that God expects of His people, however, is not just a matter of looking to Heaven; there is certainly room to “raise your thought toward *Heaven*” (the well-known hymn of Teresa of Ávila), but the believer also has his feet on the *ground*. The **holiness** of the people -and ours- **has to do with lifestyle**.

A different way of living, different from other peoples, was going to be key in

the entire pilgrimage to the Promised Land and is also key in our pilgrimage. It is no coincidence that the Lord Jesus concludes and summarizes the Sermon on the Mount by saying: «Do not be like them» (Matt. 6:8 ESV). This is the holiness that God expects of His people!

One of the greatest needs of the church today is **attractive holiness**, a lifestyle that promotes, embodies and proclaims the values of the kingdom of God: «**righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**» (Rom. 14:17 ESV).

This faith that trusts, obeys and seeks holiness is exactly the opposite of a **magical faith** that borders on **superstition**. It is important to remember this today when some Christian groups, even without realizing it, turn faith into magic. What is the difference between faith and magic? **Faith is serving God, magic is using God**. We cannot reverse the roles: it is not God who is at my service but I at the service of God.

The history of both Israel and the Church shows us the great danger of turning faith into a spiritual transaction with God, a “I give so that you can give me” type of negotiation (*do ut des*). The progressive moral decline of Christianity in the Middle Ages coincided with the loss of vision of biblical faith, which became increasingly something utilitarian and focused on me, on my needs.

As a German theologian expressed, **God** becomes like a **waiter** who serves me what I ask for. This faith is very fragile and explains many cases of spiritual crisis. Mature and solid faith says like Saul, knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus: «Lord, what do You want me to do?» (Acts 9:5 NKJV).

## **A God who provides**

What did God give to the people -and to us today- in the decisive hour of the crossing of the Jordan? He provided them with three great resources, the “three P's” of God's care:

### **1. His presence**

The ark of the covenant was the quintessential symbol of the presence of God. Following the ark meant following God, which is why it was so important to obey the instructions.

*«And commanded the people, “As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it”» (Josh. 3:3 ESV).*

The presence of God among the people meant **guidance, rest and blessing**: «And Joshua said, “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 Canaanites, the Hittites...” (Josh. 3:10 ESV).

Furthermore, the ark is a **type of Christ**: the wood symbolizes Jesus the man and the gold the deity of Jesus. We are called today to follow Christ in the same way that the people followed the ark. His presence becomes real in us because «Christ dwells in our hearts through faith» (Eph. 3:17 ESV). Jesus himself said: «I am with you always, to the end of the age» (Matt. 28:20 ESV).

## **2. His provision**

God provides the right thing at the right time. And He does it according to the needs that He sees.

What were the needs of the people at that time? **Solid and wise leadership** in the person of Joshua: «The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”» (Josh. 3:7 ESV).

The crossing of the Jordan was going to be decisive for the people to trust in Joshua. We are impressed to see how throughout history God has provided -and provides- key men and women who have guided His people, especially in decisive moments, in the different Jordan crossings when humanly the task seemed impossible. Thank God for His provision!

## **3. His protection**

In this case it was a miraculous protection: «Tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you» (Josh. 3:5 ESV). **The miracle is inherent to faith.** The most significant events in salvation history revolve around a miracle: the departure from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. The miraculous, supernatural event reminds us of the power of the God who is «Lord of all the earth» (Josh. 3:11, 13 ESV). **Eliminating miracles is converting faith into philosophy and the experience of faith into humanism.**

God **kept the people** during the crossing of the Jordan and took them to the Promised Land. He kept his promises. God keeps His **church** so that «the gates of Hades shall not prevail against her» (Matt. 16:18 NKJV). And God also keeps each one of us, because He has said: «I will never leave you nor forsake you... therefore I will not fear what man can do to me» (Heb. 13:5-6 ESV).

## **An experience to remember: the value of historical memory**

God takes care of all the details. The divine instruction concludes with some

very significant words:

*«...so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord» (Josh. 4:6-7 ESV).*

It seems like a secondary detail, but it is of vital importance: **preserving historical memory is a necessary link in the transmission of faith**. The crossing of the Jordan had to be a **memorable** experience, that is, **a milestone to remember and teach** to subsequent generations. Because **God's faithfulness in the past is the guarantee of His guidance in the future**.

*Dr. Pablo Martínez*

**Dr. Pablo Martínez** is a psychiatrist and he currently works at a private practice in Barcelona. He develops a valued ministry as lecturer and teacher in many European countries on topics like “Mind and faith”, “The therapeutic value of the Gospel in emotional problems” or “Taking care of yourself”. His books dealing with such issues have been translated into 16 languages. He teaches Pastoral Theology and his ministry as a Bible teacher is also very appreciated. He is honorary president of the Grupos Bíblicos Universitarios (GBU – IFES).

The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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