

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: Joshua 3; 4:1-9.

The passage of Jordan, about which we read in these verses, is a consummate presentation of what the Lord is saying to us in this series of studies. It must be quite clear to us, as we read it, that it represents a profoundly critical point in the history of the people involved, the culmination of a long process of preparation, the initiation of a new and wonderful phase of their life. Moreover, from abundant New Testament support, we see that this is a representation of the life of the children of God and of the would-be children of God in our own time: that is, the New Testament takes up this incident in the life of Israel and declares that it was a type, or figure; that its real meaning, its abiding meaning, its spiritual significance relates to the Christian or the would-be Christian.

So that we to-day, at this present time and in our present situation, really stand right into this part of the book of Joshua. It applies to us. We are not reading ourselves back so many centuries ago, merely with the idea that something happened then in Israel's life - that they passed out of the wilderness into the land of Canaan. We are reading from there on into this present day. We are bringing that right forward and saying, 'That is not then, it is now; and this is that, or that is how it should be'. The wonderful thing is that that could be now, at this very moment, in experience. When Joshua said, "Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" - that is possible now, that can be brought right up to date. So let us look at it, for we are keeping closely to all that we have been considering in these past chapters - the pioneering of the heavenly way.

THE OBJECTIVE IN VIEW IN THE TRANSITION

First of all, let us recall the objective, the object in view in this transition, this passage of the Jordan. We are given the spiritual interpretation. It is shown to be an illustration of life in resurrection and heavenly union with Christ. That is the objective to which God has called His people. That is precisely the thing for which the Lord calls us at all, by His grace - resurrection union with Christ: union with Christ on the ground of resurrection life. And not only that, but union with Christ in His heavenly life, by the Holy Spirit; oneness with Him as in heaven, and all that that means.

That is the objective; that is the irreducible minimum of God's will for His people. If we do not come to resurrection union with the Lord Jesus, we have not come to any union at all. That is to say, that, for all practical purposes and values, we know nothing really of the meaning of being "joined to the Lord". There are many who know something of what it is to be in union with a living Christ, but who know perhaps very little, at most not enough, of heavenly union with Him and all that that means. Until we come to that, we have not come to the very object of our salvation, neither have we come to God's satisfaction in saving us. We must see what that means.

TRANSITION**(a) INTO THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST**

Getting the objective clear before us, let us look more closely at the transition. This transition had two aspects. In the first place, it represented a transition from the authority of darkness into the authority of Christ. Up to this point these people had still been under the authority of darkness, notwithstanding that they had been out of Egypt for a good many years. The fact is that, while they had long ago come out of Egypt, Egypt had only just come out of them. It is possible for us to be saved from the world in an outward way and not to be saved from it in an inward way. Egypt had retained a strength inside of them through the years of the wilderness. That generation had constantly been found harking back to Egypt. "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt" (Exodus 16:3). 'Oh, that we had stayed in Egypt!' It was still inside, it still had a grip upon them, they still had dreams and imaginations of satisfaction there. They had not come completely and utterly to that emancipation which settles once and for all that there is absolutely nothing back there in that world, nothing at all; the very thought of it is repugnant, is hateful; the very thought of it means desolation: they had not come there. There is that, even in Christians, which sometimes, under strain and pressure, makes them begin to think that they would be better if they were back in the world - they would have a better time. But this Jordan was the settlement of that. Whatever had lingered and lurked through all the wilderness years was finished with at the Jordan. That authority, that inward control, was finally broken at the Jordan. It was transition, utter transition, from the authority of darkness into, typically speaking, the authority of Christ.

Again I am going to say something that I have often said before. There is such a thing as having and knowing Christ as your Saviour without knowing Him as your Lord - that is to say, only for salvation: as Saviour from condemnation, from pending judgment, from hell; perhaps Saviour into some of the positive blessings of that position: and yet - oh, how much more is possible and real for our knowledge! It is all too long a gap from the exodus to the 'eisodus', the entry; far too big a space between these two things. How many, many Christians, after having been saved for a long time, go to a convention and make Jesus Christ Lord, discovering that that space between the two things has been far too long, that this might have been long ago. Jordan speaks not only of our finding Christ as our Saviour from judgment and death, but of our finding Him as Lord - with all that it means that He should be Lord. It is not until He is Lord that we begin to discover the riches, the unsearchable riches, that are in Him, like the wealth of the land.

(b) INTO THE FRUITFULNESS OF LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

The Jordan again represented the transition from the desolation and barrenness of nature into the fruitfulness of life in the Spirit. They had lived so much in themselves; the self-life, the natural life, had been so much asserting itself; their own personal interests, advantages or disadvantages had occupied such a large place on their horizon. If things in the line of God's purpose were not easy, but going contrary to nature, they were full of murmurings. If things went well, of course it was quite natural to be full of rejoicing. It was nature either way. It was nature rejoicing because things were easy. It was nature grumbling because things were difficult. It was the life of nature - and what a barren wilderness that was for them, a wilderness outside and inside. And now the Jordan puts a finish to that and represents a transition from that barren, desolate life in the flesh, in nature, to a life in the Spirit.

For that Man, who presently confronted Joshua as representative of God, was, I believe, no other than the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Captain of the Lord's host. He is that - "Prince of the host of the Lord" (Joshua 5:14), He called Himself. When those words which we so often quote, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6), were used by the prophet, you know that the literal wording there is, "Not an army... but by my Spirit". And here is the Captain of the host of the Lord, the Spirit, and from this time He is going to take charge - and what a different situation will obtain! It will be life in the Spirit. Yes, there will be fruitfulness now; not a life without slips and mistakes - they happen - but a life adjusted to the Spirit. It was to be a life of progress, a life of enlargement, a life of constant enrichment, a life of entry upon their inheritance. "Every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). From the barrenness of nature to the fruitfulness of life in the Spirit: that was the meaning of the transition of Jordan.

THE GREAT PIONEER GOING BEFORE

But then we come to the central focal point of it all: the great Pioneer - this time written with a very big capital - the great Pioneer as represented by the ark of the Lord of the whole earth. Once again, this is not imaginary interpretation. The New Testament warrants, by definite statement, the interpretation that that ark was a type of the Lord Jesus. We will not stay to prove it from the Scripture, but it is so. The ark then typifies Christ. The great transition was going to be made. How would it be made? "The ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you" (Joshua 3:11). "There shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits" (Joshua 3:4). It is not possible to estimate exactly what that measurement was, because there are three cubits in the Bible, and we do not know which of them this was (and even if we did, we do not know precisely what the measurement was); but the very smallest measurement here of the cubit would make this over - well over - one thousand feet between the ark and the people.

Why that? 'Keep that space, come not near, keep that mighty space between you and it' - shall we say, 'between you and Him'? Why that great space?

(a) THE GREATNESS OF CHRIST IN DEATH

Does it not speak, in the first place, of the greatness of Christ in death? - for it says here in parenthesis "Jordan overfloweth all its banks all the time of harvest" (Joshua 3:15), and this was the time. "Jordan overfloweth all its banks": a wide inundation beyond its channel, spreading itself out in all directions; and we know so well that that speaks of the waters of death and judgment. It speaks of the Cross of the Lord Jesus. And He stands right in the flood, in the overwhelming inundation of death's power: stands right in it, right in the centre of it, right in its full depth and length and breadth; stems it all.

How great is Christ in death! Death is no small thing. Death is a mighty overwhelming flood. He has plumbed its depths, He has taken its measure, and by dying He has destroyed death. There He is. He stands right into

death: death has lost its power: death is thrown back: death is forbidden to move on. The description of that is wonderful. While on the one side there was the mighty wall of water standing up, on the other side, right down to the Dead Sea, all that spoke of death was dried up. How great is Christ in death! Incomparable! He is alone in that. No one else could do it.

(b) THE EXCLUSIVENESS OF CHRIST IN DEATH

Then it speaks of the exclusiveness of Christ: not only the greatness but the exclusiveness of Christ in death. 'There was no other good enough'. Oh, the blasphemy of talking about the death, even the most heroic death, of a soldier, giving his life for his country, being comparable to the death of Jesus! No. Whatever heroism there may be - and there may be a great deal which can be honoured, valued and appreciated - but however great may be the heroism and sacrifice of men, it 'comes not nigh unto' this by two thousand cubits. There is a space between. God has placed that space, and He says, 'This is inviolate: He is apart, nothing can come near to this mighty work of Jesus Christ; no one else has done it, and no one can do it; it must be done by Him alone'.

(c) THE LONELINESS OF CHRIST IN DEATH

Alone. Look at the loneliness of that figure - forgetting for the moment that there were Levites bearing the ark on their shoulders: the description is intended not to bring them into view at all, but to have this ark only in view - to behold it, as it were, afar off. It is a great space. If it were only one thousand feet, that is quite a distance from which to look on a little object like that, a lonely little object right out there. How alone He was in death. "All the disciples left him, and fled" (Matt. 26:56). He said, "Ye... shall leave me alone" (John 16:32), and they did. And then the deepest pang of all - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). His aloneness in death is portrayed by the ark out there. Behold Him: "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Why this aloneness? Well, you see, 'there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin': there was no other great enough, big enough, to bear the sin of the world. He being the only one who could do it, it involved Him in this utterness of loneliness. Who could bear to know in full consciousness their utter abandonment by God? Thank God, we need never know that. We need never for a moment have the consciousness that God has forsaken us. That is not necessary, and indeed we could not survive it. But He knew it. It took Him, the Son of God, to come through that. It is the price He paid as the Pioneer - the Pioneer of our salvation, the Pioneer of our inheritance, the Pioneer of our possession of all that unto which God has called us by union with Christ. The Pioneer had to pay the price of this utter and final aloneness. Is that not something of the sigh, the cry, in Isaiah 53? Yes, He is the alone One there, wounded for our transgressions, smitten of God and stricken, His soul made by God an offering for sin; but "He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days", and out of that loneliness shall come, in a mighty multitude, the children of His bereavement (Isa. 49:20).

IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST BY FAITH AND TESTIMONY

The next thing, and the final word for the moment, is identification with Him by faith and testimony. No, we cannot literally and actually come into this. Thank God, it is not necessary. I mean that we are not called to go through all that He went through, but we are called to take a faith position, to give attestation to it in a very practical way. Not just walk in and through and take it as ours, but to recognise that it is only ours because of Him, only ours in Him. There is an identification of life with Him.

And so this identification by faith and testimony is seen in the commandment of God as to what was to be done. Out of the bed of the Jordan, out of the place where all this was transacted by the great Pioneer of redemption, stones were to be taken, and - notice - by twelve men: "out of every tribe a man" (Joshua 4:2). In effect, every man of every tribe is here represented. It is a personal matter for every one. "Every man... a stone". It has to be a personal transaction, a personal testimony, a personal appropriation of it all, a taking of it upon our shoulders as bringing us under all that it means; our committal to it, our committal to the death of the Lord Jesus, to the fact that in Him we died; our committal to His burial. "We were buried... with him" (Romans 6:4). Then our committal to His resurrection. The stones in the Jordan signify our union with Him in death and burial; the stones taken out of the Jordan and built up for a memorial on the other side, our union with Him in resurrection.

But there has to be a practical, personal, individual transaction. "Every man... a stone." Have you taken the stone on your shoulder personally? Have you definitely done this? You know how the Apostle Paul tells you that the testimony is borne, it is so familiar. "We were buried... with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). That is this story quite clearly, so simply. Yes, by baptism we declare that we have taken the

stone on our shoulders, we have made this our responsibility, we have definitely committed ourselves to all this.

Let me say again - it is not just to be saved from judgment, death and hell, but to be saved unto - not only from, but unto - all that which is in the heart of God; that it is no longer what we are going to get, how it is going to affect us: that is the old tyranny; no longer personal circumstances at all. It is what the Lord wants; it is what will satisfy and glorify Him. That is the passion of the heart that is so committed; and when He gets us through on that matter, gets us over the fence of self-interest, worldly interest, fleshly government, on to the ground where it is all the Lord and what He wants, we shall have found the land flowing with milk and honey, we shall have found the riches of Christ, we shall have come into an opened heaven. So much of our Christian life and work is self-ward. Until it is changed from self to the Lord, fully and utterly, we shall know nothing of the heavenly life of spiritual fullness. But that is what is here represented.

May the Lord find us all making this great transition, this declaration - "Every man... a stone": that Jordan, with all that it means, has got to rest upon our shoulders.