

The Crossing of the Jordan

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the significance of the ark of the covenant as a representation of Jesus and the Christian journey of faith amidst warfare and challenges.

Scripture: John 1:29, Romans 6:23, Romans 15:4, Ephesians 1:19, Ephesians 6:12, Hebrews 3:19, Hebrews 12:2

Topics: "The Cross", "Christian Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks preaches about the greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as represented in the ark of the covenant, emphasizing the journey from the wilderness to the land as a symbol of warfare in the Christian life. He highlights the significance of the ark moving into the Jordan River, representing Jesus entering death at its fullest, dealing with sin and death in its entirety. The sermon delves into the backward work of the Cross, the role of the priests in dealing with sin, and the contrast between human weakness and God's power manifested through Jesus, who becomes our strength in the midst of adversity.

Transcript

We are considering the greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as represented in the ark of the covenant, and we now leave the wilderness and come to the crossing of the Jordan. Thus we have open before us the Book of Joshua, especially the first three chapters. Here we are in that great forward movement of the ark from the wilderness to the land - and let us keep in mind all the time that we are not thinking so much of the ark as we are of the testimony of Jesus. We are not living some thousands of years ago, we are living today. We are told that "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" (Romans 15:4), so that what we are concerned with is what the Lord Jesus means to us today, and that is all centred in the ark of the Old Testament.

Warfare in View

There is one thing of which we must take note right at the beginning. This movement from the wilderness, through the Jordan and into the land, was entirely with warfare in view. It is necessary for young Christians especially to recognize this, but if the older ones are wondering why there is so much conflict in the Christian life, we had better remind ourselves at once that that is the nature of the testimony of Jesus. If we are really associated in heart with the testimony of Jesus we are going to find that we are committed to warfare. Perhaps we know the fact of conflict, but we very often have questions about it, and even think sometimes that because of the conflict things are all wrong. I think it would be right to say that any Christian who knows nothing about conflict has not really entered fully into the meaning of the Christian

life. Of course, we all sing very heartily "Onward, Christian soldiers!", but we have some very big questions when we find ourselves in the battle. The journey of the testimony of Jesus is therefore a journey of warfare.

I remember hearing a very famous preacher put it this way: On Sunday morning the Christians go to church and sing "Onward, Christian soldiers!"; on Monday night they go to the theatre; on Tuesday night they say: "We will have a cocktail party"; on Wednesday night they decide to go to the pictures; on Thursday night they play cards at home; on Friday night they go off and visit some of their friends; on Saturday night they say: 'Now, what shall we do tonight?' - and on Sunday morning: "Onward, Christian soldiers!" Now, that may not be true of any of you, but a Christianity that only sings about Christian soldiers and never goes into the battle is not true Christianity.

So I remind you that when we come to the Book of Joshua there is a movement entirely with warfare in view. In chapter one the Lord is preparing Joshua for the battle, and the word which constantly occurs is: "Be of good courage." 'Courage' is a great word in that chapter! Joshua was a man of courage before - all his history shows him to be so - but this new movement needs more courage than ever before. The ark is moving on to new ground, and there are many great enemies to this testimony.

In chapter two the Lord commands that they send out their spies in order to take the measure of the people, so that the people of Israel might really recognise what they are up against.

So in chapter one there is the preparation of the leader and the people for war, and in chapter two the being quite intelligent as to the kind of enemy that they have to deal with. Then, with those two things done, in chapter three the ark comes to the foremost place. So chapter three is our present occupation, for it is the ark, or the testimony, with which we are occupied.

The Superlative Sign

In chapter three, verses 10 and 11, we have: "And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Hivite, and the Perizzite, and the Girgashite, and the Amorite, and the Jebusite. Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan." The superlative sign of victory is in the ark passing over into Jordan.

It says: "Jordan overfloweth all its banks all the time of harvest" (3:15), which means that at that time Jordan would normally be in a state of flood. I think you are familiar with the fact that Jordan always speaks to us of death, and that in the Bible it is always a figure of death, so that when the ark entered the Jordan at the time of flood, it represents the Lord Jesus moving into death at its greatest and fullest. When Jesus entered into death, death was at its full floodtide. I think it is important for us to remember that the death of the Lord Jesus was in relation to death in all its fullness. Jesus in His death took death in its absolute power.

Human judgment would have said: 'It would be very much better if this whole thing had been arranged at the time when there was no flood in Jordan.' Naturally this would have been an argument against the wisdom of God, but He, who was in charge of this whole matter, arranged that it should be just then, at that time. It was a part of His Divine wisdom and plan to have this thing just when normally Jordan overflowed all its banks.

You see, God knew what He was doing. He was giving a great illustration of what the death of the Lord Jesus really does mean. The Cross of the Lord Jesus was not something that just touched the shallow waters of death. You remember that John said about Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), and Paul said: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Therefore sin with death in its fullness is represented here. Jesus entered death at the flood. He has taken the full measure of death. There is no degree or aspect of death that Jesus has not dealt with in His Cross.

There is a difference here from that which happened at the Red Sea, for when they passed through that the waters stood up like a wall on either side of them, and when the Egyptians entered into that passage the wall fell on them. At the Jordan the waters did not stand up like a wall. We are told that it began right away up the Jordan at the city of Adam, and it was there that God cut off the waters. "The city of Adam has been placed 16 miles up the river, and it seems probable that a stretch of 20 or 30 miles of the river bed was left dry" (Amplified Bible). I am tempted to dwell upon that for a long time, for I think we could make a lot out of that word 'Adam'! However, in the Cross of the Lord Jesus, God went a long way back to deal with death. The entering of the ark, or the entering of Jesus into death, meant that the waters were cut off a long way back - "Far back at Adam" (3:16).

The Greatness of Christ's Death

Dear friends, the Lord Jesus has done a very great thing in His Cross, for He has dealt with death a long way back. That is the backward work of the Cross. I am so glad that the Lord Jesus had dealt with sin and death before ever I came into this world! We have come into something that He did long before we had a life on this earth. I have heard of some young Christians being asked the question, when they have been baptized: 'When were you crucified with Christ? When did you die with Christ?', and they have answered: 'When I was baptized.' Oh no, it was a long, long time before that. We have come into a very far-reaching victory of the Lord Jesus over death.

Now that brings us to the ark carried by the priests. This is an interesting point, for a change has taken place. It was the Levites who carried the ark through the wilderness, but now it is not the Levites. It is the priests, and this has its own particular meaning. What is the special function of the priest? It is to deal with sin. It is the priests who have to take the blood of atonement, and by that blood cut off the power of sin.

Now here we have a very interesting thing. We said that the Cross of the Lord Jesus went a long way back. If you look at the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Genesis, at verse 13, you will find that God is speaking to Abram, and telling him of the future history of his seed - "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge." 'That nation' was Egypt. Then God says to Abram: "And in the fourth generation they shall come hither again" (verse 16), and that is the land of Canaan, where Abram was at that time. Now, in that 16th verse, there occurs this little phrase: "For the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full." What does that mean? The Lord's people could not possess that land of promise while the Amorite was there, or until the Amorite had filled up the cup of iniquity, but when the Amorite had filled it up to overflowing, then God would bring Abram's seed into the land and destroy the Amorite. You will have noticed that the Amorite is mentioned as one of the seven nations in the land, and several times in this Book of Joshua the Amorite is used as representing all the others. Whatever was happening in Egypt during the four hundred years, God was watching the Amorite. He was watching the people in the land and seeing the cup of sin become more and more filled. When it became full of iniquity, God said: 'The day has come. Now is the time for My people to occupy the land.' So the River Jordan

overflowing all its banks represents sin at its fullest, and the ark moving into the Jordan says: 'The day of the Amorites is finished.' Sin and death at the flood are now to be judged. That is why the priests carried the ark, for the priests are the people who have to do with sin.

Man's Weakness and God's Power

But there is another side to this. It is the side of Israel. There was the side of the Amorite and all the other nations, but there was also the side of Israel, and what does that side represent? Surely it speaks of human weakness. These people had failed terribly in the wilderness, and had proved themselves to be a very weak people. Everything here at the Jordan speaks of human weakness. Look at the Jordan! What a powerful thing it is! Look at all those nations in the land! What powerful forces they are! In other words, what is man in the presence of sin and death? What can man do when he meets the full power of sin and death? How weak we all are before those great forces of evil! If these nations in the land represent 'the principalities, the powers, the world-rulers of this darkness and hosts of wicked spirits' (Ephesians 6:12), what can we do before those awful powers of evil? Why, those powers have only to do a little thing to us and we go to pieces! Satan has only to attack us in one small way, and we feel how helpless we are! So, on the side of Israel, it was a picture of human weakness faced with terrible powers. But the ark goes right in, and from this time onward all the powers in opposition will have to give way. Jesus has gone ahead of us and has met all the powers of evil in His own person. So the ark does represent the greatness and the glory of the Lord Jesus! He stands for us in the midstream of all adversity, and in all our weakness He becomes our strength. The ark stands in the midst of the flood and holds the ground in victory.

The Look of Faith

Do you notice that it is commanded that there shall be a space of two thousand cubits between the ark and the people? There is a great distance between the Lord Jesus and us. It is what He has done for us. So the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says: "Looking off unto Jesus the author and perfecter of faith" (12:2). Death focused all its forces upon Him, and He focused His superior forces upon death. That is why the Apostle wrote those words with which we are so familiar: "The exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe" (Ephesians 1:19). Jordan, as the mighty power of sin and death, may be very great. All the principalities and powers in the heavenlies may be very great. But the Apostle says: 'the power which is for us exceeds all those powers'. It is the perfect work of a perfect Person for us. We have a perfect Person who has done a perfect work, and has gone on before us, like the ark. Of course, it is a question of faith; if we believe that we shall come through. One generation never went through the Jordan, and the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says: "They were not able to enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19). This is the generation of faith.

We ought to spend some time upon that, because there is a very interesting thing here, but will leave that for another time.

But let us remind ourselves of the thing with which we are really occupied: the greatness and the glory of our Lord Jesus. I think you are beginning to agree that this ark represents something very wonderful. It is not just an Old Testament object, it is an everlasting truth. It sets forth what Jesus Christ is, and what He has done, and it has very much more yet to say to us.

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