

tomorrow

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Date: 08 May 2016

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[0 : 0 0] What does tomorrow hold? I wonder if that very word, tomorrow, is a word that fills you with apprehension or even dread. Tomorrow. What will happen tomorrow? Perhaps for others, it's a word that conjures up rather a sense of feeling of excitement at the prospect of tomorrow.

Maybe for others, just a tired sense of indifference tomorrow. How will it be any different to today? When I think of tomorrow, when I do, and perhaps not often, I'm conscious that sometimes I have trouble trying to work out what happened yesterday and what I'm meant to be doing today, and tomorrow is just beyond my realm of consideration. Well, in the passage that we have read in the Bible, Joshua is anticipating with unconcealed excitement what is to happen tomorrow. Listen to what he says as he directs words to the people of Israel there on the banks of the Jordan. In verse 5 of the chapter that we read, Joshua told the people, consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. Tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. I love this passage.

I love this verse. I want us to consider this historic occasion, for it is a moment of epic history in God's dealings with his people, and consider this historic occasion in a manner that can shed helpful light on where we are as a congregation. Now, I'm not suggesting that where we are as a congregation, on the cusp of a few months of disruption, followed by a fresh start in this building, but refurbished, not suggesting that it is as epic a moment as the moment that we're considering in God's Word, as the people of God were on the eve of entering the promised land. But I do think that that epic moment that we read of here in this chapter can be both instructive and challenging for us where we are, and as we try, with God's help, to look ahead to our tomorrow and to what tomorrow holds for us.

And so I want to organize what I want to say this morning around this pregnant and tantalizing word, tomorrow. And three aspects in particular that I want us to spend some time considering. First of all, the fear of tomorrow, that reality, what that looks like, what that involves, the fear of tomorrow.

But also, and very particularly and central to all that is before us, is the promise for tomorrow. But then there's another aspect to it, and that is what I'm describing as the preparation for tomorrow.

[3 : 3 3] So let's begin with that first aspect, the fear of tomorrow. Tomorrow can be scary, can be very scary. Let's think about God's people on the banks of the Jordan as they contemplate entering somehow the promised land. They know that that's what they're there for. That is the plan, to enter into the promised land on the following day. Somehow. I wonder how they felt at that moment. What fears perhaps were almost overcoming some or many of the people gathered there on the banks. Let's think about some of the fears that no doubt were present. First of all, that the fear of the unknown. There was the immediate unknown of how they were going to get across the river that was in full flow, as we read in the chapter. That was a very immediate unknown. But there was, of course, more that was unknown in what lay ahead.

Indeed, the chapter speaks very explicitly that that was the case. Notice what is said there in verse 4. Then you will know which way to go. The instructions that they were to follow, the priests.

Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. They're very telling words, aren't they? You've never been this way before. This is a step into the unknown.

Never before. You've been wandering for 40 years, and you've covered a lot of territory, but you've never been here before. This is new ground for all of you. You've never been here before.

And that can be a very scary place to go, where we've never been before. The fear of the unknown. I think there's also, and I'm sure there was in many of those gathered there on that occasion, a fear of inadequacy. There's this great call that is presented to them by Joshua, consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. We'll come back in a moment to the nature of that call. But at this point, I want to simply highlight that fear of falling short and the possible consequences of falling short. I wonder if some of the people, as they were challenged in this way by Joshua, I wonder if some of them were thinking, well, you know, are we consecrated enough? If this is important, you know, will we fall short? You know, will I be the reason why things don't happen as they're meant to happen? Because I'm not good enough. I'm not holy enough. I'm not consecrated enough. I wonder if there was almost a sense among many of, well, are we really able to do this? This is a big ask. So many years have passed. So many years of failure. So many years of never being able to do what we've been called to do. You know, will tomorrow really be any different. Are we able to do this? Are we strong enough? Are we smart enough? Are we brave enough?

[7 : 02] The fear of inadequacy. But I wonder if there wasn't also among the people gathered there a fear of opposition. We're told very clearly in the passage that there were many who opposed them. Of course, we're told of that in the context of a promise that those enemies would be driven out. But nonetheless, the reality is that they were there. Verse 10 we read, this is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, and so on. A long list of tribes that were opposed to God's people. They were their enemies.

So there's this fear of opposition. It wasn't just about getting their own house in order, consecrating themselves, consecrating themselves. Important though that was. There's also this matter of the many who opposed them. But I think all of these fears feed into a part of a greater or a central fear, and that was the fear of failure. Of course, this fear of failure, in the measure that it was present, was fed, I'm sure, by past failure. You see, they'd been here before. As a people, they'd been here before.

The actual people gathered there were a new generation, but as a people, they'd been here before. Forty years before, they'd been at this point. On the cusp of entering the promised land, and they had failed.

They'd failed. And I wonder if that past failure in some way marked their current fear. Why will tomorrow be any different? Well, we're on the banks of a very different year for us. The best part of a year, we don't know exactly when it will begin, but camping out, out of this building. We also have beyond that, more importantly, the prospect of a fresh start in a refurbished building. But that brings its own pressure, the pressure of getting it right, the pressure of being grateful and visionary stewards of God's generosity and provision. And that can be scary. What if we mess up? What if we don't grasp the opportunity? What if we let it slip through our fingers? What if tomorrow isn't what we'd like it to be or want it to be or think it should be? And I think the kind of fears that would have been present, I'm sure, I'm sure there on the banks of the Jordan. It can be present for us also. The fear of the unknown. What will a fresh start look like? Will I like what it looks like? If or when we identify new opportunities or obligations to reach out in new ways, will that take us out of our comfort zones?

And will that be a scary place for us? But also, and I'm sure this is true for many of us, the fear of inadequacy. Are we really up for it? Are we capable of confronting our failings and with God's help overcoming them? Are we committed enough? Are we consecrated enough? Are we even capable of the level of consecration that God rightly demands of us? Of course, that fear of inadequacy can be at the very personal level as we look at ourselves, but also as we look around us as part of a body of people, and we wonder, well, you know, are we up for this? Are we able to do this well? Perhaps also for us, the fear of opposition. We don't have Canaanites and Periscites and Jebusites baying for blood, but there are some scary giants out there. What we believe and what we want to declare to the world, certainly much of what we declare to the world, is increasingly the subject of ridicule and undisguised hostility, or if not hostility, then great and depressing indifference. As the church of Jesus Christ, we have enemies, and we can be afraid of those enemies. And of course, all of these things, as with the people of God so long ago, they feed into perhaps this great fear, the fear of failure.

[11 : 46] In our case also, perhaps that can be fed by past failures. We look back and say, well, there were other opportunities that we didn't grasp, other moments when we fell short.

You know, we don't do vision. We cower in the face of challenge. We're not up to grasping with decision and verb and energy the opportunities provided by a fresh start. And so maybe we're afraid that we will not for the first time fall short. What do we need in the face of fear? What do we need in the face of fear of tomorrow? What we need is God and His promises. And that brings us to this second element that I want us to focus in on, and that is the promise for tomorrow. And we find that promise in this central verse, in the words of Joshua. Joshua told the people, consecrate yourselves for tomorrow.

The Lord will do amazing things among you. They're simple words, few in number, and yet they're bursting with hope and excitement and great content. And we'll just stick with the content of these words.

Notice three aspects, three realities we find in these words, in this promise. First of all, the Lord will do amazing things. Focus there on who it is who will do these amazing things.

And as we grasp what Joshua is saying, and it was true for the people of God then, and it's true for us as the people of God today, it is the Lord who does the amazing things. And grasping that dispels the fear. You see, remember the different aspects of fear that we noticed, and see if we can apply them to God. And this will seem a very foolish exercise, but hopefully it will impress upon us the reason why our fears can be dispelled. The fear of the unknown. Is there anything unknown to God?

[13 : 46] Is it even conceivable that God would know anything of the fear of the unknown? It's a piece of nonsense. God knows everything. There can be no fear of the unknown in God. The fear of inadequacy.

Well, again, what folly to even attempt to suggest that that could be anything that God would be prone to. God knows nothing of inadequacy. What a fear of opposition. Well, yes, there are those who oppose God. Does He fear them? No, He doesn't fear those who oppose Him.

But what of that great central fear, the fear of failure? Well, let me just put it in these simple words. God doesn't do failure. God doesn't do failure. You remember a few years ago, there was a manager of a Scottish football team. The team and the manager shall remain nameless, but who famously declared, we don't do walking away. Well, he did actually walk away or was pushed eventually.

But in terms of God, be clear on this. God doesn't do failure. We can talk about failing nations and failing governments and failing leaders and failing congregations and failing ministers and failing Christians, and we could extend the list, but never, ever a failing God. And this must be our confidence as a congregation. It is the Lord who will do amazing things amongst us. So that's the central to the promise that we have. But then we have also that element right at the end. The Lord will do these things among you, in your midst, in your favor, and by implication with your involvement.

Now, for Israel, it was to take possession of the promised land and grasp. But for them was this exciting, fresh start, this new beginning. In many ways, it was their very beginning as a nation.

[15 : 53] From 40 years of wandering, often aimless wandering, to a new time of stability and growth and prosperity as they take possession of the land. It is interesting to note that the Israelites are described as a nation for the first time, having just crossed the Jordan into the promised land. There in verse 17, the priest who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing. Up until then, they'd been spoken of as a people. Now they're spoken of as a nation, having crossed. This is a new beginning for them. What about us? Well, our new beginning isn't as epic as the new beginning that we read of here. That is very clear. Our circumstances are different, but God's ability and desire to do amazing things amongst his people remains undimmed. We are to take possession of that which belongs to the Lord. We are to extend God's kingdom. We are to reach out to and invite and welcome in God's elect in this city, and indeed beyond as God grants opportunity. It's the Lord who does these amazing things. He does them among you, but then we have the other word there in that promise. The Lord will do these things tomorrow. Now, in the case of the Israelites, it really was tomorrow. And as we draw parallels, it would be wrong to impose on the text, even more so wrong to impose on God Himself a timetable for us.

We can't demand of God that tomorrow, what is it, the 9th of May, He do amazing things amongst us. But we can and ought to have a holy impatience as we call on God to do amazing things amongst us.

Is that what you desire for this congregation that you form a part of, that God has brought you to, that you might be a part of? Let's notice finally a third element here of this passage as it sheds light for us, and that is the preparation for tomorrow. It's right that we focus, as we have done, on God as the author of the amazing things that are being spoken of. But we also can and must acknowledge that God of His own initiative and exercising His own sovereign prerogative ordinarily sets conditions for the doing of amazing things in and amongst His people. And we find that in this passage also, notice the Israelites there on the banks of the Jordan, I think we can identify three key characteristics, we might even call them conditions, but certainly characteristics met by the people that made tomorrow for them such a propitious and suitable time for God to do amazing things.

I think the first thing that is striking about the people on this occasion is that they were a united people, united in so many ways. They were united even in presence, their physical presence there, all together in the banks of the Jordan, this huge multitude all together. Each and every one of them was there, even at that level, that very physical level. But united, of course, also in obedience.

Throughout the passage, we don't have time to go through and note every occasion, but throughout the passage they're given instructions. And at no point is there any suggestion that they do anything other than obey the instructions. And these are God's instructions delivered through Joshua, through the officers, through the priests. But as they are commanded, as they are instructed, so they do. They're united in obedience. And very related to that is that they're united in purpose.

[20 : 08] Even if many of those there, and I imagine this was the case, were not altogether clear what the purpose was or what the direction of travel was, certainly beyond crossing the Jordan.

Nonetheless, there was that unity of purpose as they go in the way that God was directing them. A united people. That's important for us. We thank God for the measure of unity that we do enjoy as a congregation. But that is something that needs to be cultivated and defended and fought for.

Doesn't mean that we all agree. Doesn't mean that we don't have different opinions. Unity is not the same as uniformity. Let that be very clear. But nonetheless, this unity that characterized the people that made that day a suitable day for God to work in the manner that He did.

A united people. But also, we notice another characteristic, that they were a consecrated people. Verse 5, again, let's remind ourselves of the call that is made. And the implication is clear that there was a positive response to this call. Joshua told the people, consecrate yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. That word for, we have in the middle of the promise. Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow. Another legitimate way of translating the original word used there would be with the words, so that. Consecrate yourselves so that tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. We understand it in that way. You see that it was necessary for the people to respond rightly to the call. In the absence of a right response, God's own purposes might have been very different. Now, are we saying that the consecration of the people or the lack of consecration, does that tie God? Does it limit God? Is God limited by our lack of consecration? No. But God does ordinarily work in and through a consecrated people. There's no better historic example than what happened to this very same people of God 40 years before. They rebelled.

They were disobedient. They lacked faith. They wanted to go back to Egypt, and so they failed. Not because God was unable to transport them into the promised land, even in the face of their rebellion. Of course, he could have done so, but he chose to wait for the moment when they were consecrated to him as they were called to be. What does this consecration look like? Well, what Joshua had in mind was, on this occasion, in all probability, a consecration that was ceremonial in nature. But nonetheless, that even ceremonial consecration speaks of a spiritual principle that holds unwaveringly for us.

[23 : 21] Well, what about us? What does it mean for us to be consecrated, to be sanctified? In essence, really, it's a call to be who we are. To be consecrated is to be set apart for God, and the reality is that God's already done that. God's already set us apart. In a very real and objective way, we are already a consecrated people. And so when there's a call to consecrate yourselves, God really is saying is, be who you are. Be who you are. That's who you are. Live who you are. Don't live a life that denies who you are, or that is a contradiction of who you are. I have set you apart. Live as a set apart people.

And note that this is something that the people need to do. Joshua couldn't do this for them.

Joshua was a great leader, a man of faith, and we thank God for him. But he couldn't do this for the people. He couldn't do this on behalf of the people. The people needed to do this themselves.

There's a telling silence between verses 5 and 6 in the account. In verse 5, you have the call. Consecrate yourselves.

And then in verse 6, it's the following day. We're told nothing of the hours that passed in between the call and the sun rising in the following day.

[24 : 56] But it was during those hours that each man, woman, and child had to respond to this call, to each go to their own tents and to do business with God.

And we are called to consecrate ourselves so that God might do amazing things amongst us. Is that something that we are willing to do? Is that something that we will do?

A united people, a consecrated people. I think there's another characteristic that we find here of the people that explains why God chose on this occasion to do the amazing things that He did, and that is that they were a led people. Leadership was on this occasion and remains crucial.

We see this from the very beginning of the account in almost a fleeting way, and then throughout the account, but notice just this curious way in which we detect this leadership right at the very beginning.

It's lost somewhat in the manner in which the verse is translated in the Bible that we're using here in the church. In verse 1, it says, early in the morning, Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim. But if we were to take a more, what shall we say, some might say wooden, but more literal translation of what is said there in verse 1. It's something along these lines.

[26 : 28] Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and they set out. You see, in our version, it's just they're all together. But the manner in which it's presented is in a manner where it's Joshua who rises early, and the people follow. He's the one who's taking the lead, and the people follow. Of course, it's not just Joshua. He's not the only one who exercises leadership in this account. The priests also are exercising a leadership, leading the people in the way that they might go. And the leadership that we find here is a leadership that is demonstrated in faith, the faith of the leaders, but also the action of the leaders. Of course, the action is faith-driven.

The faith of those who lead, and very particularly of Joshua, is evident in the very call that is made to the people. Then in verse 5, this verse that we're focusing our attention on, consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.

Joshua is in no doubt as to the Lord's intentions. Now, he was privy to the Lord's intentions, but he believes what God has told him. He has no doubt that tomorrow is the day.

Now, this isn't a man who's saying, well, hopefully things will work out well this time. Hopefully, tomorrow will be a good day. Let's make a really big effort, and well, we'll see what happens. No, tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things. But the faith of the leaders is also demonstrated in the actions that they take in this whole matter of crossing the Jordan on any number of occasions in the passage, and we won't go through the passage and identify each one. We find the leaders, the priests, taking the lead, going on ahead. And that action, that leadership that is demonstrated by their actions has its own features. It's marked by clinging to God. That's expressed in their carrying of the ark, the ark that symbolized God's presence. And the priests hold that ark, and as they carry that ark, so they're declaring that their confidence is in the God of the ark, clinging to God, confident in

God, confident in God in the very actions that they're called to do. There's a striking aspect of this account that I think I've highlighted on another occasion. You know, the instructions that were given to the priests is that they had to go to the Jordan. And the very curious thing about the instructions is that they weren't simply to then wait on the edge of the Jordan for the miracle to happen. Let's see what the Bible says. Don't take my word for it. Notice what it says in verse 8.

[29 : 23] Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant. So, this is God speaking to Joshua, and this is the message Joshua needs to communicate to the priests. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant, when you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.

There's no miracle yet. They need to go in first. And then we're told what actually happened from verse 13. And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, set foot in the Jordan, his waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap. Well, again, it's anticipating what will happen. And of course, that is what they did. Now, that must have been scary.

The Jordan was in full flow. And they're not to wait and have a prayer meeting and say, God, do your miracle, what you did at the Red Sea. Well, they have to step into the water. And it's only when they step in. And the priests, if the priests still have to do this, other people, the priests still have to step into the water. And then God responds. And the waters pile up in a heap, and they can cross over on dry land. These were a people led by men who were clinging to God and who were confident in God.

And here there is a call to those whom God has appointed as leaders of this congregation. We have a particular responsibility, a greater responsibility, a more serious and onerous responsibility to lead the people to cling to God and to be confident in God.

This is a people that were led. But of course, although there is a particular call to those who are leaders, there is a call to all, indeed to all of us, to be leadable, if indeed that's even a word.

[31 : 23] Yes, the leaders must lead. But who will they lead? The people here followed the call. They went in the stead of those who led, clinging to God and confident in God. And that too must characterize us as a congregation. Well, let's return to where we began. Tomorrow. Is tomorrow a scary word or a scary place? Fear is human. Indeed, fear up to a point is a healthy thing. But our God is a God who has favorite words for His people. Words that He has spoken time and time again throughout history.

And we'll discover them again even this evening as we return to Mark's gospel. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, for tomorrow I will do amazing things among you.

Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the history of God's people. We thank You that it is our history. We thank You that as we consider what happened on that occasion so long ago, we're not simply exploring, even drawing lessons from events that have little to do with us but that somehow can be applied to us. But no, we are exploring and examining our history. These are our people. These are members of our family. We belong with those spoken of in this passage. We are part of that same people of God.

But we thank You above all that the God of whom we read is the same God. And we thank You that You are indeed a God who can and does do amazing things. We thank You for what we discover of Your amazing deeds in Your Word. We thank You for what we can testify to concerning Your amazing deeds, even in our own lives. And help us to have the faith to thank You for the amazing deeds that You will yet do amongst us.

And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.