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## ROADBLOCKS

### Joshua 3

Laurie and I were returning home after a long flight. Unfortunately we were flying into one of our less favorite places, LAX. By the time we got out of the airport it was 11 P.M. The good news was that at that time of night we wouldn't have to deal with the awful LA traffic. We would have an easy, smooth drive home. Just past Long Beach on the 405 we were dismayed to see brake lights ahead on the freeway. Are you kidding me? At 11:30 on a Friday night we were running into traffic! Ah, but there was a reason. There was construction ahead. A lane was closed. All right, a brief delay, no problem. Oh wait, it's not one lane that is closed, it's 2. Frustrating, but still it shouldn't delay us for too long. Too my great dismay it turned out they actually had 3 lanes shut down! They left only one lane open. Really? One lane? I wish. It was the unthinkable. They had shut down the entire freeway and were detouring cars onto surface streets where they were basically parked, waiting, their only hope of escape being the Second Coming. We found out later from friends who live in that area that Caltrans was routing people off the freeway onto surface streets that were also under construction. We decided that we would prefer not to spend the rest of the month stuck in traffic in the LA area so we got out of there by using GPS to direct us to the 91 freeway. We figured we would take it to the 5 and come home on it. We patted ourselves on the back right up to the point where we saw brake lights ahead again. They were doing construction on that freeway as well. It was then that I saw the shocking truth that I'm going to reveal to you. Caltrans is actually a front organization for Satan.

All we wanted to do was get home, but CalTrans stood in our way. The way home was blocked. We were going to have to find some way to deal with the road block. We did survive it though for a time it honestly felt like some intelligence, some evil force was doing everything it could to keep us from our goal. Have you ever felt like that is not a bad analogy for your life? If you ever have had even a hint of that, there's some hope. We will see it in Joshua 3.

## BARRIERS HAPPEN

In this chapter Israel is primed and ready to invade the land. It's go time. They've learned from the Mossad that the people of Jericho are quaking in their sandals for fear of the Israelis. The people of Israel have confidence in Joshua and are sure he'll figure out some way to solve the problem of the fortress of Jericho. But before they can take on that problem they have another one. They have to get to

Jericho which is on the other side of a river. Before they ever get to their first battle they have to cross the Jordan River and actually enter the land of Canaan.

Now that doesn't sound like a big deal. After all it's not like the Jordan is the Mississippi or the Amazon. Weren't there places where you could ford the Jordan relatively easily? Yes, but they didn't happen to be at one of them, and more to the point it was the wrong time of year to be attempting to wade across the Jordan. Verse 15 says the Jordan "is at flood stage all during the harvest." It was the harvest season, which meant the river was at its high point. The Jordan isn't the widest most impressive river in the world, but at flood stage it is still fairly wide and likely more than overhead deep, and the current was very strong.

Laurie and I were going to take a hike while we were on vacation. This hike involved crossing several streams, one of them big enough there is a rope to hold onto while fording it to keep from getting swept away. Unfortunately the night before we were going to take the hike there was a lot of rain, enough that there was some local flooding. The result was that the stream we had to cross was now anywhere from waist to chest deep. We decided not to do the hike.

Israel was facing a headache that invading armies have often had to face. How were they going to get across that river? The usual methods were finding a shallow place to cross, build a temporary bridge or find enough boats to ferry everyone across. Unfortunately none of those options were available to Israel, so what were they going to do? Would their invasion plan be defeated before it even started?

So there was a historical dilemma for Israel. So what? What does that have to do with us? This book is about fighting life's battles. There are some hints in this passage for us as we fight our battles. We too are going to face some barriers that might easily stop us in our tracks as we seek to live out the life of the kingdom of God. What are some of those barriers?

You probably have some barriers in mind even as I bring up the question, but I will suggest a few. One might be the barrier of a large external, circumstantial obstacle that is in the way of you achieving what you desire in your life. For instance, I think of some of the people in my family. Anna needs a job. She is capable, talented, highly accomplished, yet nothing has happened so far. It has been very frustrating. Everybody she contacts tell her she is terrific and will have no trouble getting a job, but she still doesn't have a job! Toby is trying to get into med school. So far that has been encouraging, but the reality is it is still a huge barrier and he has no control over the outcome of the enterprise.

Maybe your barrier is a task that just seems overwhelming to you. You might easily think that by now doing my job would be a slam dunk for me. Dude's been at this job for 34 years, he ought to be able to do it in his sleep. Whip up a sermon in an hour or two, right? Maybe that's true for some but for me at times it seems overwhelming. Every week is like this huge battle that I feel like I lose. I feel like I ought to be a lot better at what I do, and that's not to mention the aspects of ministry that major in my weaknesses. My point here is not to garner sympathy, but simply to suggest you might have some obstacle or task in your life that seems overwhelming.

Maybe your barrier is dealing with a difficult person or relationship in your life. Or maybe it is just the barrier of trying to live a fulfilled, meaningful, joyful life in the midst of daily routine. It's another day of going to the same classes, doing the same job that is ultimately meaningless, completing the same tasks. We make up our bed every day, only to mess it up at night. What's the point? Poor Laurie, she has to make meals for us. She has a few she knows she can count on. If she ventures too far from them her husband probably won't like it. It's awfully hard to keep doing the same things over and over with enthusiasm. Maybe it's your own spiritual weaknesses and failures. Or maybe it's a combination of those things, or something that I haven't even thought of, but we all face barriers.

David wrote of some of his barriers in Psalm 55:2-4. "My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me." David goes on in verses 12-13 to say, "If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend." David's barrier was being betrayed and attacked by a close friend.

Paul also was confronted with barriers in his effort to serve. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 he wrote, "For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us." Paul wanted to visit the Thessalonians but was repeatedly stopped by Satan. There are going to be barriers for all of us, but there is some good news.

## **BARRIERS CAN BE OVERCOME**

In this passage we get two ideas for how we can approach the barriers we face based on the experiences of ancient Israel.

### ***Dedicate Yourself***

After the intelligence report comes in and the people of Israel learn that the residents of Jericho are so afraid of the Israelis that they are soiling their underwear everybody is psyched up. They are ready to go, but what are they supposed to do? And how are they going to get across that river? Verses 3-4 tells them what to do. “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, who are the Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it.”

The ark, of course, was the star of the first Indiana Jones movie. It represented the presence of God with his people. Joshua warned them to keep a thousand yards back from the ark. The main point of that was practical. Some think this has to do with holiness. The ark is holy and you must not come close to it. You might remember the scene in the Indiana Jones movie where the Nazis got too cozy with the ark and it zapped them all. But there is no indication in the passage that this is about holiness. This was about the fact that the Israelis were a large mass of people so they needed to keep some distance so they could all see where it was going in order to follow it.

In verse 5 Joshua told the people “Consecrate yourselves.” That’s a word we don’t use much in our everyday speech. What does it mean to consecrate one’s self? The word consecrate comes from the Latin word *consecrare*. Con means “with” and the Latin *-secra* comes from the word for sacred. So it means to make sacred. So the word means to make oneself sacred, to dedicate oneself to the service of God. Exodus 30:29 describes lampstands and dishes that were to be used only in the temple. They were consecrated.

Friday night we had a terrific reception for Michael and Carissa. She got to wear her wedding dress for a second time. It is a beautiful dress. Out in the parking lot after the event ended she lamented that the bottom of her dress got dirty. It doesn't really matter because she'll never wear it again. Laurie's wedding dress has been hanging in her closet for more than 34 years. Dresses like that are reserved for that one special occasion, the wedding. You don't wear a wedding dress to go out to dinner at Chili's or to work in the garden. It is reserved for that one special occasion. It has only one purpose, to be worn on that one most special of days. That's what it means to be consecrated.

To consecrate oneself then means to devote or dedicate oneself to the service of God. It is to clear away all the debris that might trip one up and commit to following God. This is the first crucial step in dealing with every single barrier we face. It is to consecrate ourselves. It is to remind ourselves and renew our commitment that what our entire life is about is to be dedicated to the service of God. I am here to follow him as I approach this barrier, whatever it is.

Perhaps you think you are more like a pair of jeans or a polo shirt, a sort of multi-purpose article of clothing than like a wedding dress. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord you are consecrated like a wedding dress. You are set apart for one highly honored purpose, and that is to follow him in everything you do. This is why you exist. Your purpose is not to get what you want, not be comfortable, not defend yourself, not avoid pain, not be famous or rich, it is to follow God in everything you are and do. In what you pursue in life, in your choices, in your responses to triumphs, losses, hardships and barriers, the point is to follow God.

This changes our perspectives totally as we approach barriers. We typically see a barrier as blocking our path to our goal, whatever that goal is. We have decided that the goal is this thing on the other side of the barrier, whether that goal be having the job I desire, the marriage relationship I desire, having a career or job I want, making the money I think I need, or just experiencing a little peace in my circumstances.

When we consecrate ourselves we change the goal. Now as we deal with the barrier that confronts us the goal becomes following and serving God. Usually there is nothing wrong with the other goal we are pursuing. But that goal may or may not be God's will for us, and what we are dedicating ourselves to is his wise and good will, whether it includes that goal or not.

Laurie has a surgery coming up this week. They are going to take out an organ that I know it is possible to live without because I don't have one. Men don't come with this particular part. Laurie is not someone that anyone would say is overweight, but while we were on a walk this week she said, "Well, one good thing about this surgery is I guess I will lose a little bit of weight." She will. But is that the goal? Hey, here's a great new weight loss program. Just remove some body parts. Take out an organ or two and you can lose some weight fast.

Obviously it would be idiotic to try to lose weight by removing organs from your body. Laurie will lose a little weight as a byproduct of the surgery but the point of

doing the surgery is to have her be healthy. That's a little bit like how we need to think about our goals and the barriers we face. Like the goal for Laurie's surgery is to be healthy, our real goal is to follow the Lord and serve him. The byproduct may be we accomplish the earthly goal we have in mind. If we will consecrate ourselves to serve the Lord as the rule of our lives then we will never find ourselves in the awful position of having accomplished our "goal" but in the process failing to follow the Lord.

Laurie and I recently had one of those little moments that married people typically have. We were staying at a hotel that gave us lots of cards. We had key cards for the room, towel cards to get towels at the swimming pool, a valet card for the car for the one time we used valet parking, and a key card to get in and out of the self-parking lot. One of my many weaknesses is that I struggle with details, so when I have a lot of things like that to keep track of, well, I just don't do it very well. So I had all those cards plus the keys to the car to keep straight. It didn't work. I lost one of the room keys. Right after that Laurie and I went out to our car in the parking lot. I tried to keep everything in the right place but as I got ready to drive I realized I couldn't find the card for the parking lot. We couldn't get out of the parking lot without that key. The hard to fathom part of thing was Laurie had just handed me the key. When I told her I couldn't find it she said, "Well what did you do with it Rick? I just gave it to you, how could you have lost it?" She was surprised and mystified. My problem was that I was already feeling like a nincompoop for being so stupid. That caused me to feel defensive. Because of that I read her response as being accusatory. She didn't intend it this way but what I interpreted her response to be was that after years of living in denial she was finally admitting the truth that her husband is a hopeless idiot that shouldn't be allowed to run around loose in the world. When you are already frustrated with yourself and feeling stupid it doesn't help when you think your wife is piling on. So I wanted to snap back at her and let her know in no uncertain terms that she was not being a helpful and wasn't being a real loving wife at just that moment.

Those little moments are the kinds of interactions that set a tone for a marriage. They can inflict damage far beyond the significance of the incident and create resentment and hurt that becomes the focal point of the relationship. Fortunately at that moment it hit me that what I needed to do was follow the Lord. And he told me to love my wife, which means to be patient and kind and understanding. I realized I had to make a choice between my hurt feelings and my desire to protect myself on the one hand and following the Lord on the other. I chose to follow the Lord. Meanwhile, Laurie was doing the same thing. She decided that the Lord would have her communicate respect and love to her husband. And she did. I

started to tell her I was sorry for being so hopeless and she began telling me it didn't matter and that she was lucky to be married to me because in the things that did matter she said I score high. Then she found the key. All was well. We followed the Lord and we got past a barrier of a little marital dustup.

### ***Expect God To Work***

The last part of verse 5 after Joshua commanded the people to devote themselves to following the Lord is quite an amazing statement. He said, "for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you." Joshua is telling the people that God will act. He will be real in their lives and that if they will follow him they will be astounded at what he does. They are going to see him act. The Lord then assures Joshua that he will indeed act and that people will see that he, the Lord, is with Joshua just as he was with Moses. Then he tells him to instruct the priests who carry the ark in front of the people when they reach the river the next day to go stand in it.

So Joshua instructs the priests who are carrying the ark along with the chosen representatives of the 12 tribes to walk out in front of the rest of the people and when they get to the river to step into the water and just stand there. If I'm one of those priests I fear my response would be, "So let me get this straight, Joshua. You want us while carrying this box, wearing sandals and our robes to step into the river and just stand there, is that right? So if everybody is supposed to follow us 1000 yards back when we get to the river and stop they're going to stop. So the plan is we stand there in the river trying to avoid getting knocked over by the current and everybody else just stands there half a mile away doing nothing? Does that about sum it up?"

But Joshua told them there was a plan. When they stepped into the river God was going to cause the river to stop flowing so the whole nation would be able to cross without even getting wet. This kind of thing had happened before. We all recall when God caused the water in the Red Sea to part so Israel could cross it. Hey, a sea is a lot bigger than a river, so if he could do that surely he could do this. It took considerable faith for them to execute this plan. Yet they did exactly as they were instructed. Verses 16-17 tell us what happened. "As soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away." The verse ends with "So the people crossed over opposite Jericho." According to verse 17 "the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground."

Oh come on, you can't possibly believe that can you? Something like that would violate the laws of nature. Yes, it would. Uh, that's why we call it a miracle. If you don't accept the idea of the miraculous this will not be the last time you will have a problem in the book of Joshua. Al Michaels, sports announcer became famous for a line he used at a climactic moment in a game. "Do you believe in miracles? Yes!" It was at the 1980 Olympics when the underdog American hockey team beat the seemingly invincible Soviets. That was ridiculously improbable, but it wasn't a miracle. But the Bible is quite insistent that God is real and that he can and on rare occasions does intervene in the normal course of events in the physical world. If Jesus turned water into wine, walked across the surface of a lake and rose from the dead, then it is possible that God could stop a river from flowing for a few hours.

Here is what I want you to take away from this: if you will indeed dedicate yourselves to following the Lord here is the message. Tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. That does not mean he will do a miracle in your life tomorrow, but he will do some amazing things. In Exodus 14:13 standing on the banks of the Red Sea Moses said to Israel, "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today." In 1 Samuel 12:16 Samuel said to Israel, "Now then, stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes." In 2 Chronicles 20:17 Jahaziel, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said to Israel, "You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem." In Isaiah 29:23 the prophet, speaking of the work God would do, said when they saw that would they would "stand in awe of the God of Israel." Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20 that he would be with us always. Nothing is too great for him, so we should expect him to work in our circumstances.

That doesn't mean he's going to part waters or turn water into wine. Neither does it mean that he is going to vault you over whatever barrier you face. It doesn't mean that you should "expect a miracle" that will give you whatever it is you want or think you need. But what it does mean is that we should expect God to be at work in our lives. We should expect him to be present and active in our world.

I admit that I am annoyed by Christians who are desperate for God to prove himself by some miraculous act. They can only believe if God will show himself, so they "expect a miracle." They decide they need to name the miracle they want and then claim it by faith. This, unfortunately, mostly produces disappointment when the real miracle doesn't happen. So they have to create ersatz miracles or explain why what happened really was a miracle.

In the early years of our ministry in this area there was a young man who played the drums. I remember when he broke his arm. As a result he couldn't play the drums until the arm was healed. But he was connected with some "claim the miracle" friends. They prayed for him and encouraged him to have faith and believe that God could heal him. He did believe, and sure enough, he could tell God had healed his arm. He took his cast off the arm and that night played the drums. Can you guess what happened? The next day he was in excruciating pain from his broken arm. He had to sheepishly go back to the doctor, humbly endure the doctor's tongue lashing and have the cast replaced after they took x-rays to make sure he hadn't done more damage to the arm.

That one was a little humorous, but I also have encountered some situations that were not the least bit funny. In fact they were tragic. I've personally known people with terminal cancer who were, according to their "claim the miracle" friends healed, but who died a few short months later.

Wanting to not be like those people it is easy for us to go to the other extreme and essentially have a faith in a God who never acts in this world in any way. He simply is not a factor in our thinking or in what we expect to happen. That tendency gets strengthened by the fact that all of us have prayed for some dramatic act of God and then it didn't happen. Unfortunately I think that can lead to a faith in a powerless God who has no influence in our daily lives.

God has shown up in Laurie's and my life in dramatic ways many times. Had he not done so I wouldn't have been able to get through college or seminary, Laurie and I would not be married, we would not have been able to survive financially here in this area, our kids would not have been able to go through college, and the list goes on. God is very real and can act in our world.

At a leadership prayer breakfast a number of years ago Marine General Charles Krulak told an amazing story. During the Gulf War in 1991 the Marines originally were assigned to be part of a ground force that would assault up the Saudi Arabian coast straight into Kuwait. They had to move 80,000 Marines into position. The biggest issue for them was water. They found an old airfield where they built their logistics base because it had wells that supplied 100,000 gallons of water a day, which was just what they needed for their troops. Two weeks before the war started commander in chief General Norman Schwarzkopf changed the plan. He decided on a daring move, now famously known as the left hook. It involved moving all those troops to the west in a flanking maneuver. That required the Marines to move 140 miles to an area called the Gravel Plains. There was no water

there. For two weeks they had engineers desperately digging and drilling, trying to find water to no avail. They went to the Saudi government and asked if they knew of any water sources in that area. They said no. They went to the exiled Kuwaiti government and asked them. They said no. They talked to the Bedouins and nomads in the area and they all said “There’s no water there.”

General Krulak had become a Christian some 15 years earlier and he started every day spending time with his Lord. He said for those two weeks he prayed every day asking the Lord to help them with the need for water. The Sunday before the assault he was in a chapel service where they were praying for water when a colonel showed up and asked to speak to General Krulak. He said, “General, I need to show you something.” They drove down a road they had built through the desert from the Gravel Plains to the border of Kuwait. He had been down that road at least 70 times in the past 2 weeks. Over 60,000 Marines had gone down the road. They drove about a mile when the Colonel said, “Look over there.” About 20 yards off the road was a 15 foot high tower and on top of it was a cross. At the base of the cross was a pump, recently painted red. Beside the pump was a diesel engine to run it and a 500 gallon tank filled with diesel fuel. This was curious because the Marines didn’t use diesel fuel and they didn’t have any. On the engine was an on button and an off button and a keyhole. Krulak asked the colonel “has anyone seen the key?” He said, “Sir, there is no key.” Hoping against hope the general pushed the “on” button and to his surprise and delight the engine kicked over immediately and the pump began working. Water began flowing out of the pipe. Krulak called one of his engineers and told him to test the flow coming out of the pipes. He said he knew what the answer would be. An hour later he got the report. It was putting out enough water to produce 100,000 gallons per day. A reporter from the *London Times* wrote an article that made the front page entitled “The Miracle Well.”

How do you explain that 60,000 Marines had been by that location, Krulak himself had been by dozens of times and neither he nor his Marines ever noticed the well that was 20 yards off the road when they were looking for wells? How do you explain the new paint, the diesel fuel, all of it? Maybe a curious coincidence. Or maybe it really was God at work.

I had a couple of encounters with people while Laurie and I were on vacation that grabbed my attention. I realized that even on vacation we could be and should be expecting God to work. The amazing work he will do may not be giving you money or something as dramatic as the water of a river parting or a well showing up in the desert. It might be in the midst of the routine of your life using you to give someone else hope, make them feel loved, encourage them, maybe even help

them see Jesus. It might be as you face the barrier changing your attitude, enabling you to be joyful and grateful no matter what happens, causing you to be stronger and more Christlike, maybe even giving you a different plan. We don't know what the work will be. It likely won't be a physical miracle. But it will be a work of God if we will in faith expect him to work in us and around us.

Once before Israel had faced the barrier of water as they stood on the banks of the Red Sea with the Egyptian Army in hot pursuit. On that occasion they wailed in fear. God showed up in one of the great miracles of the Bible. This time they trusted and obeyed. And again, God showed up and amazed them. As we are faced with our barriers, whatever they are, let's expect God to do amazing things. Let's expect to see his hand at work in our lives.