



“You Have Not Passed This Way Before”

Kevin Presley

It's my privilege to meet you here for a little time of Bible study. Thank you for joining me. In the book of **Joshua**, we read of the time when the children of Israel had come to the Jordan River and were about to enter the promised land. After hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt and forty years of heartache and hardship in the desert, the promise made to Father Abraham was about to be fulfilled in giving them the land of Canaan. But there were uncertainties ahead of them as the land was filled with Canaanite cities and strongholds that must be invaded and conquered along the way. What would the future hold? Our text will come from **Joshua 3**.

Joshua 3:1-Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over. So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp; and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before.""

This admonition from their leader Joshua was one of caution, but also one of promise. We stand today in a similar place as we look to our own future. I've entitled today's lesson *You Have Not Passed This Way Before*. As we face a new year, how shall we meet the uncertain changes that lie before us? As the Israelites finally came to the river of Jordan, it was time at last to enter the land of Canaan. They had been a displaced and nomadic people for hundreds of years. It had been nearly forty years since they had left Egypt and they spent those years aimlessly wandering in the desert wilderness. Nearly all of those who had left Egypt had died and now a new generation had arisen that would finally inherit the land promise made to their forefather Abraham long before. It was an exhilarating but also terrifying time in some respects because though it was theirs by God's promise, Canaan was a new and strange land to them. Its cities were strong and fortified, and the people within them formidable. Now that they

were at the brink of the river, where were they to go? What were they to do? How were they to cross the swollen waters and what were they to do if and when they did so?

You remember that the leaders of Israel had passed through the company to tell them that the ark of the covenant would go before them and would show them the way to go. Therefore, they were to remain behind it. The ark's presence represented God's presence with them and indicated that God would not only be their guide but would protect and give them victory as they followed Him. They were to keep a distance between themselves and the ark so that they would not get ahead of God, but keep their eyes focused on Him and stay behind Him. It was the only way they would survive and succeed, for as Joshua said to them, *"You have not passed this way before."*

Today, we stand in a similar circumstance. This week, we stand at the threshold of a new year. Since we count time and measure our lives by years, this time of year usually causes us to do some serious introspection and reflection, and that's a good thing. We are crossing our own Jordan in a manner of speaking, and in the process leaving behind the past and facing an unknown future. Not one of us knows what that future holds. No matter what plans we have made or what kind of things we anticipate or even dread, the truth is we have no reality what the coming year will hold for our lives, by way of victory or by way of defeat. I may be speaking to people today who will not live to see the shadow of another year gather and depart. Someone watching right now may not be numbered among the living when this new year is gone. Sickness or tragedy may unfold in your life or my life that we have no idea is just around the corner. There may be temptations lurking in your future that you are unaware of and perhaps unprepared to meet. There may be opportunities and challenges that arise in the coming year that how you react to those could alter the course of the rest of your life. The land before us is strange and unfamiliar.

At the same time, this symbolic crossing over the threshold of time represents new hopes and dreams. A new beginning. The generation of forty years the Israelites were leaving behind in the desert dust was marked by failures, heartaches, and disappointments. Their sin and faithlessness had brought years of unnecessary toil and hardship. Wasted years behind in the desert. So, this passage into a new land not only presented unknown challenges but bright opportunities. It was an appropriate time to take stock of their faith and rededicate themselves to God.

The question I have for us is, how will we face the future?

John 14:6 "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

If the Israelites would've been foolish to enter a strange land without God's leadership, how much more foolish are we if we enter this unknown new year without realizing that Jehovah is the source of our strength and that we should look to Him to lead us in the way we should go?

James 4:13-15 "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

It's foolish to make plans and resolutions without God at the heart of them. Many of us make resolutions for the new year, some important and some not so much so. Many of those resolutions, we'll likely soon forget, but some we may remember. We should be very careful about making resolutions and vows, particularly when they pertain to God. Solomon told the young man:

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 "When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed-Better not to vow than to vow and not pay."

You see, commitments to God—no matter what form they take—are serious business. He is a living and all-knowing and all-remembering God, and He remembers the promises that we make and that we say we will keep. You may resolve to eat better, exercise, or get your finances in order. It may be that by February, you will have reverted back to the way things have always been. But spiritual resolutions are far more important. They are eternally serious. I want to encourage you today to use this moment in time to very seriously consider where you are spiritually. Where you are in your relationship with God. And resolve to face the unknown future with Him in front of you. Think about this: you could make a decision today that will change the rest of your life and your eternity. I want to suggest some resolves that are worth making and that you should take very seriously.

I. Resolve to put God first in everything you do.

That may almost sound cliché. That may sound like a good sentiment, but what exactly does it mean?

Ecclesiastes 12:13 "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all."

Here, the wise preacher is basically summarizing a life of varied experience with all of its opportunities and thrills that had unfolded before him. Jesus put it this way to His disciples.

Matthew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

That's the divine imperative of discipleship. That the rule and authority of God and being in a right standing with Him is to be the first consideration in everything that we undertake, think, do, or say. Not somewhere down the list, but first. Not after my career or my education, not after my pursuit of pleasure or my family. But the desire to please God and do His will should come before any of those things.

The disciples were anxious over many of the same things we're often anxious over. Where will we live? What will we eat? How will we pay our bills? How will we preserve our health and our lives? And those things are not inherently wrong, and they deserve a portion of our attention, but Jesus didn't say to set those things in order and THEN seek His kingdom. He said to seek first the kingdom and His righteousness, and those earthly considerations will find their rightful place in our lives afterward.

For example, many don't assemble with the church every Lord's Day. That is commanded of a Christian (**Hebrews 10:25, Acts 20:7**). That's not an option for the faithful child of God. That is a part of every child of God's week. Many don't do that because of a job or some other temporal considerations. They might say that if it were more convenient or if some other circumstances

change that they would try to go. There's an old gospel song that says, *Excuses, excuses, you hear them every day. The devil will supply them if from church you stay away.* You see, what we need is the resolve that Jesus expressed here, and that is to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and let other things fall into their rightful place behind. In other words, settle our priorities. Put first things first.

I heard the story many years ago of a young man who went to an old sage for advice. He wanted to somehow unlock the secret to success and hone in on the things that really matter. So, the old man—without a word—led the young man down the path to a creek and into the stream. He suddenly grabbed him and held him underwater. It quickly turned to a struggle as the young man, thinking he was about to drown, flailed and thrashed and finally fought loose. As he came up out of the water, sputtering and gasping for breath, he looked at the old man in disbelief and said, "What was that all about? What were you trying to do?" The old man calmly said, "I want to ask you a question: When I held you under the water, what were you thinking about? Your job? What you were going to do tomorrow? What other people think about you?" The young man said, "Of course not! All I could think about was if I didn't get air, I was going to drown!" The old man told him, "When you realize what truly matters and you want that as badly as you wanted air to breathe, you'll find success."

Shouldn't that be the way we are about eternal life and matters of the soul? This earthly life is but a grain of sand on the seashore of time and eternity. But we obsess over the things in that little span of time and essentially ignore the great beyond. When we want the Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom, and we desire to love and serve Him more than we want the air we breathe, the food we eat, or the water we drink, then we'll know what it means to put the Lord first in everything we do. Such a resolve is necessary if we are to inherit eternal life.

I encourage you to take inventory. Are you seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness? Maybe you stopped going to worship a long time ago. Maybe you let your spiritual life drift into a state of neglect and disrepair. You have not passed this way before and you need to face the future with your priorities in order and put the Lord at the very forefront of your life because one day, you will give account for all of your life--every word, thought, deed, and decision when you stand before Him in judgment.

II. Resolve to seek the truth.

Truth is important. I want to encourage you to set out this coming year on a quest for spiritual truth because it does matter what we believe and why we believe it. Contrary to what many say, it does matter what you do. It matters how you worship. It matters what church you're a member of. It matters how you live. All of those things matter.

John 4:24 "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

God must not only be sought, but He must be sought after the due order or in the right way. You may recall in **I Chronicles 15** that David and the priests made a mess of the procession of bringing the ark of God back to its rightful place, and a good man had even died in the process of their makeshift attempt to do it their way. David states the reason why.

I Chronicles 15:13 "For because you did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order."

People take so many things for granted in religion today. Perhaps because it's what someone led them to believe, maybe when they were children. Maybe it's all they've known. Maybe you're content with the faith of your parents or grandparents. Maybe you simply drift along with the latest fads and trends in religion. You simply conform to the beliefs and convictions of the majority and truth be told, you have never really investigated what you believe about the Bible and why. You've never really opened the Bible to see if the church you're a member of is described there. You've never genuinely looked to see if your worship is according to the blueprint and pattern of the apostles and the first century church. I want to challenge you to do that in this new year. Make a resolve that you're going to seek truth.

III. Resolve to grow in your faith.

Resolve to become more knowledgeable about the word of God.

II Timothy 2:15 "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Get on a daily Bible reading plan. There are multitudes of such plans available that will help you to read the Bible in a disciplined and structured way and read through all 66 books in six months or a year, or even sooner. You might be surprised to know how many professing Christians have never once read the Bible through. That is an amazing fact. You may be one of those people.

Lifeway Research says that half of all Americans have read little to none of the Bible throughout their lives. Only 11% have read it through one time, and only 9% have read it more than once. Some people make it a habit to read the Bible through at least once every year, and that's a wonderful habit to establish. You'll be surprised how your familiarity with the scriptures and your overall understanding of the Bible story will begin to grow when you use that as a beginning point. You may not understand some of what you read as you read it but it will whet your appetite and peak your curiosity to go searching for answers and lead you into a deeper, life-changing study of God's word. Establish habits in this new year that will cultivate a living and growing faith in Christ and His word. You will be amazed at the change for the better that will take place in your life. There are many, many lives that are spiritual wrecks and a real relationship with Christ and His word is the only thing that can salvage a life battered and shipwrecked on the shores of time. So, resolve today that you're going to grow in your faith like you never have before.

IV. Resolve to live peaceably with others.

Resolve disputes because they will destroy you spiritually and otherwise. Don't let those things fester and abscess. Get rid of grudges and unforgiveness. They are poison. Don't wait on the other party to take the first step and meet your demands. Make a resolution today that you will go and do everything you can to straighten out the problems. Maybe the problem is with a family member, a onetime friend who has sinned against you or hurt you, and here another year has passed with toxic bitterness that's eroding you from the inside out.

Romans 12:18 "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."

That is the key: *as much as depends on YOU*. Do what YOU can do. Go as far as YOU can go to live at peace with others. What a wonderful thing it would be to begin this new season of life with a clean slate in your relationships with others. That's another thing that will change your life.

V. Resolve to be reconciled to God.

I am talking to someone today who has never obeyed the Lord in baptism for the remission of sins. You've never become a child of God. You've had good intentions. You've said, *I'm going to get serious about salvation before it's too late*. But here another year has passed (that you'll never reclaim, by the way) and you have let another year, another week, another day go by without being saved. How foolish it is to face a fragile and fickle future without knowing that you are in a right standing with God.

Acts 22:16 "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

Perhaps you've done that, but you've drifted away from the faith and from the fold long ago. Your relationship with your heavenly Father is estranged and in tatters. You don't even know where to begin to pick up the pieces and get things back on track. The Bible tells you where to begin. Just like another prodigal child did long, long ago. When he was tired of the stench of sin and the mess he had made in his pride and stubborn rebellion.

Luke 15:17-20 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."

Your heavenly Father will do the same with you today. When the Israelites came to the Jordan, their path was littered with sin, failure, and defeat. But with a new resolve and hearts now turned to serve the Lord, they would enter and take the land with God's help. I hope that you will enter this new year with that same kind of resolve, and that you'll cross the threshold with God leading your way.

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