

An Easy Path, Instant Results, Open Options

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[0 : 0 0] Well, for a wee while I'd like us to turn back together to the chapter we read, the murder read for us in Joshua chapter 3 and I'm going to just read verses 14 to 17 again.

This is when Israel were about to enter the Promised Land 40 years earlier. They had left Egypt as recorded for us in Exodus. They had escaped from slavery and now they're at the point of being ready to enter the land that God had promised to them.

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests, Bair in the Ark of the Covenant before the people and as soon as those Bair in the Ark had come as far as the Jordan, the feet of the priests, Bair in the Ark, were dipped in the brink of the water. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. The waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away at Adon, the city that is beside Zarathun and those flowing down towards the sea of Arabah, the salt sea, were completely cut off and the people passed over opposite Jericho.

Now the priests Bair in the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. This is one of many passages in the Bible that seems a long, long way away from life today. We are back about 3,000 years or 3,400 years.

We're in the Middle East and I know people who have been nomads for the past 40 years in the wilderness and are about to cross a river in order to seek to conquer and settle in a land that we know today as the nation of Israel. It's a long, long way from our situation today in terms of life in Lewis in 2023. But yet, like so many other parts of the Bible, this section speaks so powerfully to us all as a church and to us as individuals.

[2 : 1 1] So one of the reasons it does that is because this passage touches on three things that we tend to always want. Three things that are very attractive and three things that will often seem like a good idea. First of all, so often in life we want an easy path.

We want something to be straightforward. So take school, for example, the boys and girls are gone out, I've gone out most of them, but those of you, we are sure you can remember, if I said to you, do you want to swap maths and English for PE? I would say yes all day long. If you go to work, you think, oh, I just want to kind of avoid responsibility, I want to avoid hassle, I want to avoid grief. So often we find ourselves thinking I need to get more exercise, but I'll start tomorrow. So often we want the path to be easy. A friend of mine was thinking about covering their driveway. They had built a house and had a very rough driveway and they were thinking about how they were going to cover this driveway, will they put concrete on it, will they put tar on it, will they put lock block on it, and they were thinking, they could do it themselves, they're quite skilled and able to do it.

And they spoke to somebody and they said, what's the best tool to use for sorting out my driveway? And the person said, your wallet. And what he meant was get someone else to do it. Don't do it yourself because it's hard work. So often in life we want an easy path. Second thing we tend to always want is instant results. That is two in so many areas of life. If you have anything like me, I spend most of my life on a big chunk of my life in front of a computer. When I click my mouse, I want a result like that. Instant response. And if the computer's slow, oh, it's so frustrating. You just want it to be quick and instant. You order something on Amazon the next day, you're looking at the post, you're thinking, oh, why is it not here? Even the other day I was driving to Barvis, there's been road works at Arnell, there's these temporary traffic lights and they take forever. And you pull up and you're thinking, is this broken? It's been read for ages. And then finally it changes. So we definitely want instant results. We want an easy path, we want instant results. The third thing we tend to very often want is that we want to keep our options open. I am a ditherer in lots of decisions, especially when it comes to food, when I go out for dinner, you go to HS1, you're looking at the

menu and you're thinking, oh, I don't know what to choose. And often I'm like, well, I'll just wait until they come and I'll just choose in the moment because I can't decide between beef stack, HS1 burger, fish and chips, so hard to choose. You go for a new car, what do you go buy, color or mileage or spec, really hard to choose. And one of the hardest things of all in terms of keeping our options open is the stuff in our house. So everyone's house is full of stuff and you think, I've got to get rid of it, but I don't want to get rid of it. We need to get empty that cupboard, put it, all that stuff, maybe we'll need it one day and you just leave it till another time because you just want to keep your options open. So often in life we want an easy path, we want instant results, we want to keep our options open and that's our title for the sermon today. And the reason it's our title, because all of this can affect us spiritually. When I talk about spiritual, I'm not talking about a kind of weird mysticism, I'm just talking about the big questions of ultimate reality, talking about issues of life and death, talking about the non-physical things that we know are real and that are really important, things like our sense of peace and purpose, our identity, our dreams, our questions about what life is all about. That's what we mean when we talk about stuff that's spiritual. And in terms of that, in terms of our faith, we can very often come to God, whether it's exploring the Christian faith or whether it's with a particular prayer point or whether it's thinking about how we can maybe serve in our lives as followers of Jesus, we can come to God and in the back of our minds we're thinking, please can I have an easy path? Please can I have instant results? And please can I keep my options open? And for all of these, God responds and he says, nope. He says no. More often than not, God will not give us an easy path. And more often than not, he will not give us instant results. And instead he calls us, rather than keeping our options open, he calls us to make bold and courageous decisions. And the key point I want us to see today is that the reason he does that is because his way of doing things is actually far better. And that's true in the life of Israel in this chapter. It's true in our life as a congregation and it's true for us all as individuals. So I want to think about each of these together one by one. In terms of Israel, there's some fascinating things to see in this passage. As we said, they're standing on the riverbank, they're on the western side of the Jordan and they need to cross over in order to enter the promised land. They've spent 40 years wandering as nomads and now they're finally ready to enter Canaan under Joshua's leadership. But there's one massive hurdle that remains, the river Jordan and they need to cross it. And in the narrative that's set before us in Joshua chapter three, we see that each aspect of the mindset that we've described can be seen in the Israelites. We can see the desire for an easy path for instant results for an open option. All of these are present and each aspect of that is challenged. You see that if you look at the passage in more detail, if you come to verses seven and eight, God comes to Joshua and he instructs him and he says, the priests need to step into the Jordan and the waters will stop. And there's a beautiful parallel here because those of you who are familiar with the background to this story will know that when Israel left Egypt, they again faced a water obstacle. The Red Sea prevented them from escaping from Egypt and God used a strong wind to part the sea and allow them to go through. Now at the other end of the journey, as they're about to enter the promised land, again, water is in the way. There's an obstacle in front of them. But just as God did at the Red Sea, here at the Jordan, he's going to make a path for the people. But it's crucial to notice a tiny and crucial piece of information in verse 15. The Jordan overflows its banks at the time of harvest. That is telling us something incredibly important. As they stood there, the Jordan was overflowing. In other words, it is the worst and hardest time of year to cross this river. God is not taking them down the easy path. And I'm pretty sure that some of the priests, when they heard Joshua say, right, God has said, go and step in this river, and it'll die up and we'll walk across it. I said, are you crazy? Because this raging torrent is in front of them. And we know what that's like. You know, in the summer, you can look at the Carl away River and you think, I could skip across that. No bother. But in the winter, when it's been pouring for days or weeks, as is often the case, the river is reaching and you would not go near it. Verses 14 to 17 teaches about the second aspect of our title. They're talking about instant results. And you see that if you look very closely at this passage, you see that in verse 15, it says that they came into the the priests, they were being in the ark. And as soon as they came to the river, the feet of the peace be in the act were dipped in the water. And the water stopped. But there's a key point. They stopped very far away. So they didn't stop right where they were standing. [10:58] They stopped far upstream. And it's so important for us to think about that. The water stopped upstream. Now that might have been in our minds. We probably have a kind of this image of water sort of building up as a wall, which of course is possible. God can do anything.

But it's every bit as likely, I would probably say more likely that further upstream, there was a landslide that blocked the river. And that's that's that's perfectly possible because of the landscape of the Jordan River. It's something that happens from time to time in history. And just because we can explain how it may have happened doesn't mean for a second that God didn't do it. I think it's highly likely just as he used a wind to part the Red Sea, he would have used a landslide to have stopped the the Jordan. We don't know that for certain, but that's what seems very likely to me. That's not the important point.

The important point is that if the river stopped upstream, it would have taken a long time for the water to have cleared where the people were standing. And what that means is that the moment the priests came up to the riverbank and the moment is stood in the water, if you had been over there watching these priests, you would have been watching them going up and you're thinking, right, the water's going to stop. God said the water's going to stop and the peace would have come up and they'd have put their foot in the water like this and nothing happened. Because if the waters have stopped 10 miles over there, right there at that moment when the foot went in the water, nothing would have looked different. And they had to stand there and wait. And so the results were not instant. It would have taken several minutes, maybe even hours before the water level would have started to drop. When they took their first step, as far as they could see, nothing had happened. And then in verse 17, we see about the need for decisive action instead of just keeping your options open.

The priests stood still and eventually the waters did dry up and they remained there until all the people had passed over the Jordan as is recorded there in verse 17. And the key point here is that at that moment for all the Israelites, this was not a time to keep their options open. They couldn't stand on the riverbank on the west side of the Jordan, on the east side of the Jordan, sorry, it keeps in west, east side of the Jordan. And they did that about their options. This was a moment where they had to get up and go for it. There was no going back. And all of that means that for the Israelites in Joshua 3, they did not get an easy path. They did not get instant results. And they could not stand there and keep their options open. And each one of these things is teaching us something crucial about God. The fact that it wasn't an easy path, the fact that the river was overflowing, it tells us something so important about everything that God is capable of. The people are confronted by this insurmountable, this seemingly insurmountable hurdle. And yet God is able to take them through. And in doing so, it's an incredible demonstration of God's power. Now, people often struggle with records like this in the Bible that speak of God doing miraculous acts involving natural forces, whether it's rivers or winds or calming seas or whatever it may be. Some people struggle with the Bible's descriptions of miracles.

But I think it's so important to remember that we should be so much more worried if these kind of things weren't there. Because do we really want a God who only works in easy conditions? Do we really want a God who can only take people through a river that's trickling along and that's dead easy to cross? Do we want a God who will only knock down a wall if it's already crumbling? Do we want a God who can only calm a storm when really it's just a light breeze? Of course we don't. We want a God who is powerful enough to do things that to us seem impossible. And Joshua 3 is telling us that that's exactly the kind of God that we have. The fact that the results weren't instant is teaching us that what God says is totally reliable even when it doesn't feel like it. That was a massive test of faith for the Israelites. Not just putting their food in the water in the first place, but keeping it there while nothing happened or while it looked like nothing happened. They had to wait and wait and wait and they did that because they knew that what God had said was reliable. And that's such a brilliant reminder that God is trustworthy. God does not talk rubbish. God does not break promises. God does not shift the goalposts. In everything he is utterly trustworthy, utterly reliable and utterly dependable. But sometimes it is only by waiting that we'll see that. And then the fact that God called the people to decisive action is a reminder that God takes our lives seriously and he does not mess about with the truth. And this is incredibly important for us today because in 2023 in the West, as it used to be called, we have a bizarre relationship with the truth. Because the whole emphasis of postmodern philosophy that has shaped Western society over the past 60 or 70 years is based on the idea that there are no ultimate truths and instead individuals can have their own truth and we just respect individuals' decisions and rights to have their own concept of truth. We don't want to be tied down to any exclusive truth claims.

[17 : 29] In fact, exclusive truth claims are seen as offensive in our world today. We just want to say you can have your truth, I'll have mine, we'll all live in harmony, we'll all keep our options open.

But the reality is that the only times we can do that is in relation to stuff that we don't really take seriously. We can only do that in relation to stuff that we don't really take seriously. So we can be vague about what people might want to watch on TV or what people might appreciate in terms of art because we don't really take that very seriously. We think, oh, it's not that big a deal. Work is that in the West we can be quite vague about what we might do with asylum seekers because we don't take it that seriously and that's confirmed week after week when you compare how news of deaths among immigrants is reported in relation to news about deaths of a Westerner in one of our cities. There's always just this kind of lower coverage given to the lives of asylum seekers. And we can be vague about God and about religion because we don't take it that seriously. And I'm not saying that about you, I'm just saying that about society in general.

We don't take that stuff very seriously so we're quite happy with this idea of being vague about truth. But even in a postmodern society that we live in today, no one is vague on truth when it comes to something that we really care about. So if your child is sick, do you want a doctor who is saying, well, I'm not going to start treatment because I want to keep my options open? That's the last thing that you want. In an election, is it okay for Donald Trump to say, I've got my truth, I won? You might have yours, but I've got mine. And even this week, you look at that controversy on the sport, BBC sport.

For those of you who visit our congregation, BBC sport gets mentioned a lot. It's what I want. It's about my advice in life. Massive controversy because the president of the Spanish FA kissed one of the Spanish football team on the lips as part of the trophy presentation when Spain won the World Cup last week. And there's this massive controversy about it.

And both of them have got different versions of events. So the Spanish president, Luis Rubiales is saying it was consensual. I checked, she was happy for me to do it, so I did it.

And you got the footballer, Jennifer Hermoso, saying it wasn't consensual. I didn't want him to do it.

I didn't like it. And there's a massive controversy about it. And in the midst of that controversy, no one, absolutely no one is saying, well, he can have his truth and she can have hers. No one is saying that at all. No one, everyone is saying what is the truth? And whatever the truth is, there needs to be consequences. In all those situations, the truth is exclusive. The truth must be identified. The truth must be acted upon. If we take something really seriously, then the truth will always matter to us. And that means that when God calls us to a decision, he's not actually doing that primarily because he wants you to take him seriously. First and foremost, he is doing it because he takes you seriously. He does it because of how much he cares about you. So God will not give us the easy path. And that's going to show us how incredibly powerful and dependable he is. God will not give us instant results, but that's going to show us that he's trustworthy and he's faithful to his promises. And God will not leave us to just keep our options open about the things that really matter. Instead, he calls us to a decision. He calls us to follow him and he does that because you are too important to him to leave you guessing what the right path might be. So when we look at Israel, we see some amazing lessons about their experience and we see some amazing lessons about God. But as we move towards a close, it's so important to recognize that this has got so much to teach us as a church and it's got so much to teach us as individuals. For a church, what I want us to recognize is that we have seen so much of what this chapter teaches over the course of our renovation. Two years ago, I stood here on a Sunday morning and I said, we've decided to do a renovation. We're not exactly sure what we're going to do. We don't know how long it's going to take and we definitely don't have enough money. But we're going to go for it with God's help. And that was definitely not an easy path. There was a huge amount to do in terms of planning, in terms of actually doing the work and in terms of raising the money. There was a massive amount to be done. It was not an easy path. The results were not instant. When I stood here two years ago and I said, we don't have enough money. When

[23 : 12] I went home, if I had been able to check the free church's bank balance on my phone, which I can't, but if I could, there would have been nothing more in it. It took a long time for us to raise the money that was needed. And in regard to the renovation, it was so tempting to keep our options open. That's one of the hardest things when it comes to something like this in a church. You just want to put off having to make a decision.

And we struggled with that. We spent about seven years talking about it before we actually did anything. And it was so tempting to try and avoid difficult decisions about what kind of heater should we put in? What kind of lighting should we get? Should we get carpet or flooring?

What color should we paint the walls? And in all these moments, you just kind of, you just wanted to not have to make the decision. And there was so much that meant that we could so easily have stayed standing on the riverbank thinking, I don't think this is going to be possible. But in terms of the renovation work, if we had chosen the easy option, and if we had demanded instant results, and if we had wanted to keep our option open, we would still be meeting in an unrenovated building. And we would still be exactly where we were.

But the amazing thing is that God did not let us stay there. Instead, he got us to put our foot in the water. And then he did something amazing. He gave us everything that we needed.

And the key thing that he gave to Carl away was all of you. And in so many ways, you have all contributed massively to this renovation work. I stood up here two years ago and said we don't have enough money. You gave us the money. So many of you have given financially with amazing generosity. People in the congregation, people in the community, even people from miles away who don't live here, heard about our project and wanted to contribute. So many people have been so incredibly generous so that we've been able to raise the funds that we needed.

[25 : 37] Couple to that, we're so grateful to the Board of Trustees of the Free Church who gave us a loan. And we're also grateful to them because they told us to apply for grants that we weren't actually going to bother doing. But we applied for three grants. We applied for four and three of them were successful and that gave us an extra £15,000. So many people have been so incredibly kind to us. I think the most amazing moment in terms of finance though came when the Church of Scotland beside us took a collection and gave us £500 for the project. That to me was one of the highlights of the whole renovation when they were so generous and supportive towards us. You all were such a help with fundraising. We've had so many brilliant events for fundraising and that has made a massive difference to reaching the targets we needed financially. God gave us some brilliant contractors to come and help with the work. Some of you are here today. Some of you are watching online. Those who've been so incredibly helpful. Right at the very start, David and John from Total Design threw all the plans and just set us on the right path for getting all the awful stuff like building one that I absolutely hate. They helped us through all that terrible stuff.

At the very start, Sean MacDonald helped us with the fuse box that was about 2,000 years old and it was great to bring it back to get a modern one put in. Nauri Taggo and Gordon did an incredible job of the joinery work and you can admire their work particularly at the back there. A particular massive thank you goes to our painter Stuart James. I've spent the last year making a mess. Stuart has spent it coming in and making it look good.

He's done an incredible job. The paint has just been such a wonderful finishing touch. We're also hugely grateful to contractors like Nest Glace and Floor to Floor and others who've provided for us along the way. Alongside the contractors, we've had amazing volunteers, people who've come and helped. I know that I'm not going to be able to mention everybody who deserves a mention but there are some in particular who've done an incredible amount of work in terms of volunteering. Right at the very start, a dear friend of mine, Alistair Oliver, who's an elder in St. Columbus Free Church, he came for a week and installed all the tech stuff that we need and with it he also took a ton of cables and various pieces of hardware that have worked fantastically well for us. Many of you have come to labour, to shift cement, to fill skips, to break out pews. So many of you have come to clean.

This church has had to be cleaned so many times over the past year and it's been incredible how helpful you've all been in terms of supporting with that, with cleaning and with labouring.

We've had a working group from the Deacons Court which is made up of Angus and Neil and Tholl. They've been a huge help in carrying the burden and I'm so grateful to them. I do want to make a special mention for Tholl. He did all the paperwork like applying for grants. I would so much rather be out the back digging in mud, tannifying the sewer pipe than filling in a form for a grant. Oh, I hate that. I was so glad that Tholl did all of that. That was a massive, massive help. I was so grateful to my brother-in-law, Robbie, my father-in-law Gordon. They came over several Saturdays and did a huge amount to help in terms of installing a new kitchen. We had to run hot and cold water pipes from the kitchen there to the kitchen there which meant under the floor here which was not easy but we got it done. I'm so, so grateful for the help with that. Three people though in particular need a very, very special mention. There has been an absolute mountain of electrical work in this project. Everything you talk about, you think, we're going to put in new screens and stuff. Well, that's electrical work. We're going to put in new heaters. That's actually electrical work. We're going to put

in new lighting. That's electrical work. There has been an absolute mountain of electrical work done in this church building and we got it all for free. We got it for free because of Neil, Tom and John. They have been absolutely amazing and we would not be here if it was not for them. I am so, so grateful to them for everything that they've done. Alongside that, just everyone, the congregation together, praying, supporting, being patient. Those of you who came last winter, it was freezing because the doors were taken down and there was drafts coming in and I remember you coming to church with your jackets and scarves on. You were so patient. You were sometimes having to come to church in a pretty dusty setting and yet you never complained. Instead, you were all just a joy and a huge encouragement to us. So God did it by sending you and that's what brought us to the point we are at today. We didn't have an easy path. We didn't have instant results and we couldn't keep our options open any longer. Instead, we had to stick our feet in the water and God helped us every step of the way. But it's not just as we look back to the renovation that we see, the importance of all this. It's also incredibly important as we look to the future. We must remember that this renovation is not so that we can stop. This renovation is so that we can start. There's a massive need on our doorstep, a community that needs to hear about Jesus. There's incredible potential in our community and we've got to take that opportunity that God has given us. We've got to press forward together for Jesus. But as we do that, we need to remember that the pathway won't always be easy, but that's never a reason to stop. The results won't be instant, but we need to be patient and we need to pray and we need to have a positive mindset. Every time a farmer sows a seed, it's not thinking, oh, it probably won't work. It's thinking it will work, but for a long time nothing happens. We need that same patience. And we need to remember that we're going to have to make courageous decisions as we seek to serve Jesus. Now, we won't always get them right and sometimes we tie things and they don't work. That's okay. We learn from those mistakes. But as a church, we need to keep thinking and praying about how we

[32 : 45] can reach our community with the good news of Jesus. And we need to think about how we can serve our community with the love of Jesus. It is so easy to get crippled by maybe's.

Maybe we won't have enough money to renovate. Maybe we should get carpet. Maybe we should get flooring. Maybe we should get red chairs. Maybe we should get blue ones. Maybe we should have a quiz night and invite the village. Maybe we should have a place night. Maybe we should have Christianity explored. Maybe we should invite our neighbors. Maybe we should. Maybe we shouldn't. God says stuff the maybe's. Just do it. Just step in the water and go for it. Go for it. Together as a church, God has given us an amazing community to be part of.

He's given us an amazing message to share. He's given us a brilliant building for us to use. And most importantly of all, he's given us the amazing promise that as we seek to serve him, he's with us every step of the way. So there's massive lessons for us as a church as we look to the future. But last of all, there's also crucial lessons for us as individuals. We're all different. We're all at different stages. Some of us have been following Jesus for years. Some of us, maybe for a week while, some of us have just started a journey of faith. Some of us are not sure where we're standing. Maybe we think, well, I'm not quite sure. And some of us are maybe not convinced. And maybe we're just a bit hesitant and a bit skeptical about the whole thing. But for all of us, we can fall into the same traps. We can find ourselves wanting an easy path. We can find ourselves thinking, I don't want to be inconvenienced. I don't want things to change. I don't want people to speak about me. So easy to think I just want it to be easy. But we've got to remember that it's a mistake to think that easy equals better. Have you ever been on an easy adventure or to put it more locally? Does the cup of tea taste good when you've only been cutting the pizza for five minutes? You've got to work for it. You can't have triumph without trial. You can't have good rest without hard work. You can't have relief without worry.

Easy does not mean better. So often, it's the hardest things that we do that bring the greatest joy. Maybe you're stuck up because you want instant results. You think, I've prayed to God, nothing happened. I've asked God to save me, nothing happened. I need proof, but God won't give it to me. All the time we want instant results. But God is not going to give them to us because they are not needed. Because God is not so much interested in the instant experience of a moment. What God is interested in is the endless ages of eternity.

And so to become a Christian, you don't need an instant flash of lightning to confirm it all. And to serve Jesus, you don't need to be instantly expert at something. And as you follow Jesus, there are some things that you are only going to see by looking back. And then last of all, we maybe want to

keep our options open. I've hardly ever met anybody who is furiously intellectually opposed to the gospel. I've hardly ever met anybody who says, I have a philosophical objection to the claims of Christianity that I cannot accept.

[36 : 31] It's hardly anybody I've ever met like that. Instead, the people I tend to meet are like, I'm just not sure. And I just want to keep my options open. But the key thing you have to recognize is that not choosing is actually choosing. At the Jordan River, staying on the river bank wasn't keeping your options open. It was making a choice. It was actually making a wrong choice. Please, please don't do the same thing. The big lesson from this chapter, the big lesson from our renovation, the big lesson from the history of the Church of Jesus Christ is this. You have got to give God a chance to show you that he is awesome. If you stood on the river bank, waiting for the water to stop, you'd have gotten nothing. The Israelites only saw how awesome God was by stepping in. If we had stood and waited for enough money and enough expertise and a clear plan and an idea of everything that we were going to do before we started the renovation, we would have done nothing. It was only by taking the step that we saw how awesome God was. And if you are sitting here today and you're thinking, I know that I need Jesus. I know that I need to be saved. I'm not sure about everything. And I don't feel good enough. And I don't feel I know enough. You just need to go for it. Because that's what every one of us had to do. We just take that step. God will fill in the gaps. And as you follow him, you will discover just how awesome he is. Let's pray.