

The River Jordan

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I now read a few verses in the third chapter of Matthew. I will read the first six verses, then pass on to the thirteenth, and thence read to the seventeenth. *"And in those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, Repent ye ; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by Isaiah the prophet, saying. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Now John himself had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then went out unto him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan ; and they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John would have hindered him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? But Jesus answering said unto him, "Suffer it now : for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffereth him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway from the water, and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon him; and lo, a voice out of the heavens, saying. This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

The river Jordan is the most famous river on the earth. It does not owe its fame, like our own Mississippi, to its great length, or to the rich commerce that flows upon its bosom; for the whole distance from the source to the mouth of the Jordan in an air line, is only about one hundred miles, and no boat for commercial purposes ever floated upon its waters. It does not owe its fame, like the Nile, to the fact that its overflow every year makes fertile a land which would otherwise be a desert ; for the waters of the Jordan have never been utilized for irrigating purposes. Neither does it owe its fame, like the Tiber or the Seine or the Thames, to the fact that some great city like Rome or Paris or London has stood on its banks; for no city, not even a village, was ever built on the banks of the Jordan—nothing, indeed, except the temporary hut of the ferryman, which may be washed away in the spring, and rebuilt when the flood is over. To what, then, does this most famous of all the rivers on the face of the globe owe its fame? To three considerations: first, to its peculiar physical characteristics; second, to the historic events that are connected with it; and third, to an association of thought connected with it in the minds of believers.

My discourse will consist in tracing out the way in which it has derived its fame from these three sources, and connecting with this some reflections which I hope will be profitable to us.

THE PECULIARITIES OF THE JORDAN RIVER

And first, the peculiarities of the Jordan as a river. All the other rivers of the world rise in some elevated region, flow on by gradual descent until they reach the level of the ocean, and there come to rest. The Jordan is unlike all other rivers in this particular. Its principal source is an enormous spring of icy cold water which bursts up from the ground, being supplied by the melting snows of Mount Hermon, and flows off a large stream. That spring is a few hundred feet above the level of the sea. The waters issuing from it, and from two other large springs supplied by the snows from the same mountain, unite together a few miles south of this central source, and form a little lake, called in the Bible "the waters of Merom," but by the present inhabitants "Lake Huleh," a lake three miles wide and four miles long, not very deep. The surface of that lake lies on a level with the Mediterranean sea, thirty miles to the west. The Jordan starts out at the southern end of this lake, and runs south ten miles and a half, when it enters into the lake of Galilee. In running those ten and a half miles, it has sunk six hundred and eighty feet, so that the surface of the lake of Galilee, so precious in the memory of all who have read the life of our Saviour, lies six hundred and eighty feet below the level of the ocean. Out of the southern end of that lake, which is twelve miles long, the river starts again toward the south, winding in its course like the coils of a serpent, and, after traversing an air line of sixty-five miles, enters into the northern end of the Dead Sea. Now it has sunk down, down, until, when its water comes to rest on the surface of that sea, it is thirteen hundred feet below the ocean's level ; so that, unlike all the other rivers of the earth, though it rises somewhat above, the ocean's level, nearly the whole of its course is below that, and it sinks down until it fills a deep chasm called the Dead Sea, which is the lowest lying water on the face of the globe. The whole of its course, from the lake of Galilee to the Dead Sea, is through a valley varying in width from four to fourteen miles, and hemmed in on either side by mountains that rise from fifteen hundred to three thousand feet, so that that valley of the Jordan is the lowest land on the face of the globe, the Jordan is the lowest river, the Dead Sea the lowest water. It would appear to a man standing on the mountain ridge on either side and looking across that deep, narrow chasm, as though at some early period the crust of the earth had been rent asunder and the gap only partially filled up, drawing into it this stream which forms the three bodies of water of which I have spoken. The Dead Sea, as you have heard ever since you were children at school, has no outlet, and you can see at once that if it had any connection with the great body of seas and oceans, it would be an inlet. If, as Chinese Gordon proposed a few years ago, a canal were cut so that the waters of the Mediterranean Sea might pour in, they would swell the surface of the Dead Sea thirteen hundred feet up the sides of the mountains on either side; they would rise above the valley of the Jordan proportionately; the river Jordan would disappear; the Dead Sea and the Lake of Galilee would disappear; and in the place of these a long body of sea water would divide western from eastern Palestine. These characteristics distinguish the Jordan from all the other rivers of the earth, and make its formation a profound study to the geologist—one that has never yet been explained in attempting to trace back the history of this old world.

But the events that have transpired in connection with the history of the Jordan, have done much more than this to give it its fame, for the facts which I have recited to you were not known until recent times ; indeed, the first man who ever passed from the lake of Galilee along the river to the Dead Sea, took the levels of both, sounded the depths of the latter, and obtained these figures, was a Lieutenant of our own American Navy (Lieutenant Lynch), who was permitted by our Government, just after the close of the Mexican war, to take ten seamen and two boats, one of iron and one of copper, and make this

exploration. He transported his boats to the Lake of Galilee, launched them upon that water, descended the river in them, and made the learned world acquainted with these facts.

HISTORIC EVENTS AT THE JORDAN RIVER

Let us turn, now, to the second source, and look at the events which have made this river so famous. When Moses had led the children of Israel through the forty years of their wanderings in the desert, he brought them down, a short time before his death, into the deep valley of the Jordan, just above the entrance of the river into the northern end of the Dead Sea. There the valley is fourteen miles wide—seven miles -between the river on the west and the mountains that rise up toward Jerusalem, and seven miles from the river to the mountains on the east, which rise up to the elevated pasture lands of Moab. Marching down from those heights, he pitched his camp in what is called in the Bible the Plain of Moab. It is a plain about seven miles wide from east to west, as we have said, and about eight miles in length from north to south. Four or five streams, supplied by springs in the ravines of those mountains, flow across this plain and empty into the Jordan. There, on that plain seven by eight miles, and well supplied with water, was the last encampment of the twelve tribes before the death of Moses ; and while they were still encamped there, the Word of the Lord came to Moses, saying, " Go thou up upon Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, and view the land. And there thou shalt die, for thou shalt not go over with the people of Israel to possess that land, because thou didst sin against me at the waters of Meribah." When Moses received that command he could look up from where he stood to the summit of Nebo, in the southeast, appearing from the view below to be the tallest mountain in the Moab range. I camped in that valley from Saturday forenoon till Monday forenoon. There stood Mt. Nebo towering above us, with Pisgah, one of three knobs in which the summit terminates. The tall form of Moses was soon seen passing through the camp toward the mountain; and when he stood on the top of Pisgah, and looked out over the promised land, he was visible, like a speck against the sky, to the whole of that camp. He could also look down on every tent of those three millions of people, for whom he had suffered so much, and for whom, in their days of sin and wickedness, he had offered to sacrifice his life. It was a solemn moment, and what a strange experience, after taking that last view of the promised land, to fold his arms and lie down upon the mountain top, and without a pain, breath out his soul into the arms of his God ! And God buried him. If there was a funeral procession, it was a procession of angels. A worthy death for that most magnanimous man.

Thirty days were spent in mourning for Moses, and then the- command came to Joshua, "Command the children of Israel to prepare food; for in three days ye shall pass over this Jordan,*' Now, if a message out of the heavens, sent down by a cohort of angels, should reach the people of Louisville some day, commanding the whole host of them to arise on the third morning and march in solid phalanx across the Ohio river, it would not be one whit more startling than that command was to Joshua and the twelve tribes; nor did you notice the statement of the text, " The Jordan was overflowing all its banks," which it does through harvest. In order to understand how the river appeared when it was thus out of its banks, let me state that the valley fourteen miles wide, lies about seventy-five feet higher than the bed of the river. As you walk across the valley toward the river, you come to a bluff, not very steep usually—in some places too steep for a horse to go down, in others a gradual slope—and you look down seventy-five feet into a river bottom, from a half mile to a mile wide. Now a river which falls as rapidly as the

Jordan (falling nearly seven hundred feet in sixty miles) has a rapid current when it is low ; but when it is so swollen that it leaves its crooked channel, and its waters rush in a direct line toward their resting place, we can see at once with what a terrific force it plunges along. And as that valley is full of small trees and underbrush, thick and rank of growth, you can see that, as the water would be tearing its way over the brush and the tree tops, it would be a fearful sight to look at, and to think of marching across it would appear preposterous. I would rather undertake to get across the calm Ohio; and yet these people were commanded to rise the third morning and march across that river, and the priests were commanded to take the ark and march before them. I wonder how many people in Louisville would try to go across under such a command! But the Israelites obeyed—on the third morning every tent was struck for an early march. The people were assembled in long lines up and down the river, and by what soldiers would call a flank movement, they advanced, the priests keeping two thousand cubits ahead; and we are told that when the priests went down the steep and their feet dipped in the brim of the river, the water moved away as they advanced; it was cut off on the right, and ran out toward the sea, and the river was empty. It was no easy task even then to get down the steep slope; to struggle through the wet brush and the mud, and climb down into the channel of the river. Perhaps they had to use some of their axes and shovels and spades; and then they must climb up the ascent on the other side before sunset that evening. But, hard as the labor was, before the sun had gone down, in the simple style of our book, "All the people had passed clean over the Jordan." The priests were standing in the middle of the channel all this time, and when they came up, the mighty river resumed its course.

Do you believe that? I recollect that when our war was going on, a little creek there in Virginia swelled, and stopped the movements of McClelland's one hundred thousand men when he was about to take Richmond; I remember again and again that those mighty armies that were struggling in Virginia for the mastery were impeded by a night's rain making those little streams impassable to them ; and it is true that not all the armies, nor the millions of soldiers in all the armies of Europe, if they were here on the banks of this Ohio river, could cut it off or get rid of its water so as to walk across on dry ground.

Consequently, when some men read of an event like this, they shake their heads—that is too big a miracle to be credible! And why? If there is a God who created the heaven and the earth, who now rules over them, and who does his own pleasure among the armies and nations of men, and among the stars and the planets, surely there is a power sufficient for this; and the only question is whether there was an occasion or a reason to justify the Almighty God in thus stretching out His arm. He declared to Joshua, *' This day I will begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee." He is going to do something to prove that. He said to Israel, "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you." Now how could that be? How can God show to a people, beyond all possibility of doubt that He is among them? The answer you are ready to give is this: Only by doing something that none but God can do. If something had been done that might be accounted for by the forces of nature, men would have believed that the forces of nature did it. If something had been done that could be accomplished by the ingenuity of men or of angels, they might have thought that men or angels did it ; but if something is done that none but the Almighty God can do, then men know that the living God is among them of a truth ; and this is what was done. There was an occasion, then, for it, and it was the only thing, or something like it, that could be done to demonstrate

the great truth which they were made to believe. And then, another thing: have you never raised the question as you were studying this passage. Why didn't the Canaanites assemble an army on the bank of the river and dispute the passage of it—fight them back as they were struggling through? There is a very good reason: they knew very well that the Jordan would be overflowing its banks all through the time of harvest, and the harvest was on, and they were busy getting in their grain. We will go, every one, now, and gather all of our grain, and put it away ; then, the early summer work being over, every man that can bear a weapon will go down to the bank of the Jordan, and before it will be possible for them to cross the river, we will be there to meet them. I suppose that was the policy of the kings of Canaan ; so they went on contentedly with the harvest. But when they looked down from the hill-tops that day and saw that mighty host coming up out of the river in long lines of dark and white, and saw them pitch their tents on this side, and knew that the river was still swollen, another design that God had comes into view. In the language of Rahab, "there was no longer any spirit" in the Canaanites- Their souls sank within them. They too, saw that Jehovah, the God of Israel, was among that people, and they never did recover from the effects of the fright which it gave them. This made Joshua's victories far easier than they otherwise could have been. This, now, is the first of that series of events (only some of which I am going to recite to you) which have made the Jordan the famous river that it is. The people were settled in the land of Canaan, every man with his piece of land as an inheritance to his children through all generations; and is it not wonderful that a people who had been thus guided through the wilderness, led across the Red Sea, across the Jordan, planted, by the help of God, in a land that was not their own, and made rich and prosperous in it, could ever forget that God and cease to worship him? But, strange as it is, the time came when they turned away from him. Ahab was king of Israel. He married a heathen woman, who was a devotee of a false worship. He made the great mistake of his life, as many another man has done since, in the wife that he married; and a great many more women have made the mistake of their lives in the husbands they have married. He brought to the throne of God's people a heathen queen, and she brought with her the prophets of her false religion, and set up a temple; and that false God was worshipped in the capital of the Jewish nation. That was an aristocratic government; and it was then just as it is now—a very large portion of the people put on and put off their religion the way they do the fashions. When the queen was a Baal worshiper of course all the ladies of the court had to be ; and when the queen and the ladies of the court were Baal worshipers, all the women in every little city and town throughout the land who wished to be in the style became Baal worshipers ; and when all the women that wanted to be in the style became Baal worshipers, all their husbands, and all their sons, and all their daughters became Baal worshipers. Why not? "Better be out of the world than out of the fashion." And so Baal worship became the worship of the land. There were some old-fashioned prophets who did their best to stop that change of things; they cried out against it with all their might, but when it came to confronting Jezebel, she overpowered them. She murdered some of them, and many others went and hid in caves, and had their friends bring them bread and water to keep them from starving. There was only one man left at last, who was standing up in that nation and crying out with unterrified voice against this abomination.

That was the prophet Elijah, and he at last was compelled to flee for his life, away off to the rocky fastnesses of Mt. Horeb. He is hidden in a cave, when God calls and says to him, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" He answers, *'O Lord, the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant; they have digged down

thine altars, and slain thy prophets, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away." Now this was a man who would not give up ; he would not yield to the wrong when all the world, so far as he knew, had gone over on the other side. He staid to fight the battle of the Lord as long as there was any possibility of accomplishing anything, and only when it was to save his own life did he flee to that cave in the mountain. Now God wanted the world to know what he thinks of a man like that; a man who would stand up for the truth against the whole world, when he had to stand alone. So, when the proper time came, Elijah, with his younger prophet and servant, Elisha, was at Gilgal. He says, "Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee ; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." And Elisha says, "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee " ; and he followed him to Bethel. When they got up to Bethel, " Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." "As the Lord God liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee"; and he followed him to Jericho. This brought them down into the Jordan valley, just seven miles from the river. There some young prophets came to Elisha, and said, "Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day?" *Yes, I know it; hold your peace ; " and here comes out the secret reason why he would not stay behind. So Elijah says, "Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee ; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee ; " and he followed him to the Jordan. Fifty stout young men of Jericho also followed the two prophets as far as the bluff, and saw them go down to the river. When they reached the river, the very section of it which emptied itself to let Joshua's army through, Elijah draws his mantle from his shoulders and smites the river, and it opens. Once more that river opens in obedience to its Maker. The two prophets pass through and come up in Joshua's old camp, and under the shadow of Mt. Nebo; and as they walked across the plain, a whirlwind comes tearing along, and when the circle of it strikes the two prophets, Elijah is in a chariot of fire, and drawn by horses of fire, and they go whirling round and round, up and up, until he disappears like a speck in the sky. The younger prophet exclaims, "My father, my father; the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof! " And when he looked down, he saw that mantle which had opened the water. He took it up, and drew it across his own shoulders, and went back. When he came to the river, he drew it from about him, and said, ** Where is Jehovah, the God of Elijah?" He again walked through. He comes to where the fifty prophets are, who have been seeing all this. They say, "Let us go and seek thy Master; peradventure the Spirit of Jehovah shall cast him on some mountain or into some valley. "Don't go." They begged that they might go. Finally he says, "Go;" and those fifty men went (for they could see where he had dropped, if he had dropped at all), and they searched three days in those mountains to find the body of Ehjah. When they returned Elisha said, "Did I not say to you, "Go not."" They had not dreamed up to that time, that the body of a man might be taken to another world. They believed in the departure to God of the spirits of those who die, but now they have learned that God has a place somewhere, far away beyond the sight of men, where both the body and the soul may dwell with Him.

And thus God declared to that generation and to this, and to all the generations to come, that when there is a man on this earth so true and brave and strong that he is willing to stand for God and for righteousness against the whole world in arms and never flinch, that man is too precious in the eyes of God for death to seize the body and worms to devour it. Oh, that we had more men like Elijah ! The world is suffering and dying for brave men, strong men, true men, who will never flinch though pressed by every foe.

The last prophet who spoke in the Old Testament, and whose words were written down, closes the long line of prophetic utterances with these words: "Behold, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come, I will send you the prophet Elijah, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers ; lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." The Jews believed that he meant the real Elijah who had gone to heaven ; that he was coming back again; but as we learn from the New Testament, that prophetic utterance had reference to another, called Elijah because within him was the Spirit and the power of Elijah; and when that second Elijah (John the Baptist) came and began his mighty work, he began on the bank of the river Jordan, in the wilderness—and that word wilderness marks the last seven or eight miles of the river's course.

And so the surface of that same section of the river that had opened for Joshua's army, that had opened itself for the prophets, is broken by those whom John baptized. He preached there, and the people came flocking out of the cities in vast multitudes to hear his preaching. We have men in our day who preach to vast audiences—Spurgeon, for many years, to five thousand people every Lord's day in his tabernacle in London ; Beecher, in his giant church in Brooklyn, and others; and where do these men preach who have multitudes hanging on their lips? They preach in the great cities where the people live close about them. Not so with John. He went to the banks of the Jordan, began his preaching in the wilderness, and emptied the cities. No preacher that ever preached has produced such an effect as that. When I was there, I was glad to get away as soon as I satisfied my curiosity, to escape the pest of gnats, flies, and mosquitoes, and the intense heat ; for down in that deep valley, with the mountains on either side to shut off the breeze, the summer's heat is suffocating. Eight there in that kind of a place this great preacher gathered throngs out of every city in the land; and there they stayed day after day, night after night, month after month, the great multitudes hanging on the lips of the great preacher. Nothing like it has ever been known in the history of this world. While this excitement and interest were at their height, one day the listening throng saw a young man of unpretending appearance walk straight through the crowd and stand before the great preacher. To their amazement the great preacher shrinks in that young man's presence. "I have need to be baptized of thee. Comest thou to me?" With a calm voice the young man, who has no tear of penitence in his eye, no tremor in his voice, no confession of sins, says to the preacher, "Suffer it now, John. For thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Then, with a trembling hand, the great preacher leads this young man down into the water, lowers him beneath the wave, and lifts him up again. He walks out. He kneels down upon upon the shore, and lifts his eyes and his hands toward heaven in prayer. While the people gaze and wonder, they hear a sound in the sky. They look up. There comes down, with the movements of a dove, white and beautiful, the Spirit of the great God. It rests upon the young man's head, and enters into him ; and the sound they heard was the voice of the eternal God, breaking the silence of the heavens that had not been broken since that day of Mt. Sinai. The voice proclaims, " This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And thus, on the banks of that same river, where it had opened for Joshua's army, where it had opened for the prophets, there under the shadow of Mt. Nebo, the heavens were opened, and the great God makes known to the listening world that the son of Mary is His Son, and introduces in a grand and wondrous way the world's Redeemer. This was the last and the crowning glory of the river Jordan. And are not these enough to make it the famous river that it is?

THE JORDAN – A SYMBOL OF OUR CROSSING OVER INTO THE PROMISE LAND

But now we pass on, and will treat more briefly, by far, the last source of this wondrous river's fame. It is the association which connects it in the minds of Christians with that which is very dear and precious to every Christian heart, when we sing that good old song, " On Jordan's stormy banks I stand, And cast a wishful eye; To Canaan's fair and happy land, Where my possessions lie."

Here is a mingling of the ideal and the real which is very strange ; but the ideal is caught by every man that sings it, round the whole earth. The negro who sings it, and the cultivated poet who sings it, all alike, rich and poor, high and low, catch the one grand association of thought that it contains. Every man imagines himself standing on the literal Jordan, and at the same time he instinctively feels himself standing on the brink of that dark river separating us from the heavenly land. Every man, when he hears that song, looks over to the hills of the earthly Canaan, and at the same time is gazing upon the blooming fields of the everlasting paradise of God.

And why this association? Because, when Israel had wandered and wandered, until now they were within full view of the land of promise, they must yet cross that dark and swollen river, before they can enter into it. And if they had gone into that river just as they were, with none but their own strength, they would have been washed away, every one of them, down into the Red Sea, and the nation would have perished. Just so, when you and I shall have wandered, no matter how long, we finally come to that which is properly called a deep, dark river, a turbid stream that we must cross. If we plunge into it in our own unaided power, we sink to rise no more. The bottomless pit receives us. The Israelites were able to cross that river because God himself was in their midst, and standing by Joshua their leader ; and you and I will be able to cross this one, and stand on the eternal shores, if only God and Christ are with us when we make the plunge. We often have a false conception about death, to our own injury, and to the disturbance of our thoughts; we think of it, perhaps, as a plunge into some dark, cold, chilly stream, as it is represented in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress—we sink down and touch bottom and spring up, and in the darkness we struggle and pant until, after a long and fearful effort, our feet begin to touch bottom toward the other shore. I do not believe that. I believe that all the pain you and I will suffer will be on this side of death, this side of the river. I believe it will be with you and me (if God be with us there) as it was with the Israelites—that the very moment our feet begin to dip in the brim of death, death will vanish, and we are over there at once—you will cross it as soon as you touch it. There is no long, dark, terrible struggle. When you touch death it is gone forever, the light of the glorious land shines that moment upon your soul, and the glories of the eternal world are in your eye. I believe that. And what a blessed thing it is. But let me repeat, in conclusion, that if you would have death thus to vanish when you touch it, you must have your Joshua leading you; you must have God in your midst of a truth, and there with you. He alone can make death vanish, and if you will have Him there then, you must follow Him through the wilderness. You must follow that cloudy pillar by day, that pillar of fire by night ; and that pillar is the word of God. Or, to drop the figure, if you would have Jesus your Redeemer by your side when you come to the last hour, you must have him by your side on the journey. How did he go? He first went down to that literal Jordan, and there, as we have seen, he was baptized by John,

though he had no sins to wash away. Follow Him there. When He arose from that watery burial, He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed of the devil, because God was with Him. When He died, God was with Him, although for a time He thought He was not, and said, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" But that was only for a moment, for the next breath He breathed was in the utterance of the words, "Father, receive my spirit." The awful agony of a moment was over; He knew that his Father was with Him. Let us, then, follow Him down to the literal Jordan, obeying His holy command in that ordinance—arise, and go about as He did doing good, healing all that are oppressed of the devil, so far as it is in our power, and then when our feet just dip into the brim of the river, He will be with us; the cold river will be out of sight, and we shall find our way over to the saints on the farther shore. Is that the desire of any penitent soul here to-night? Of any one who has never yet begun to follow Jesus? Oh, my dear friend, what an end of life that will be! What a glorious life to lead that ends in that! Will you not come tonight and start on the way? We will sing the song, now, to which I have alluded, and if your heart is won to the love of Christ, and you desire to serve Him, come right now without any further delay, and make known your heavenly purposes.