

NEW GROUND

Title: Part 1 – “You Have Never Been This Way Before”

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If you have a Bible or the app on your phone, meet me in the book of Joshua, chapter 1.

Joshua 1. And while you're finding it, do me a favor and turn to somebody near you—pick the one who looks the most caffeinated—and just say, “**New ground.**” Say it like you mean it! “New ground.”

That’s what we are beginning today, more on that in a minute, BUT here's the scene. Moses is dead. The Moses. The guy in the Old Testament who parted the Red Sea, who went up the mountain to receive the 10-Commandments and came back glowing, the only leader an entire generation of Hebrews had ever known is gone! And into that silence, God speaks. Joshua chapter 1, verse 1:

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: ² “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.

Now hold onto that and skip down to chapter 3. Chapter 3, verse 1:

Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. ² After three days the officers went throughout the camp, ³ giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. ⁴ Then you will know which way to go, since **YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN THIS WAY BEFORE**. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.” ⁵ Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.”

And then verse 14, the crossing itself:

¹⁴ So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. ¹⁵ Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan

and their feet touched the water's edge, ¹⁶ the water from upstream stopped flowing... ¹⁷ The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

This is God's Word for us today, amen?

This summer we spent 5 weeks in a collection of messages called "The Waiting Room" where we looked at what you do when all you can do is wait, when God says STAY, when nothing moves, when you're stuck in the chair and the clock won't cooperate. I'm actually in the process of rewriting and expanding that into a book that hopefully will hit before Christmas.

BUT today we launch out into the other half of that. Because sometimes God doesn't say stay. Sometimes God says GO, CROSS, take **NEW GROUND**, right? AND knowing the difference between stay and go I think is one of the most difficult things in the faith journey. So, over the next four weeks we are going to explore God's Word for clues and learn how to hear His voice in those seasons when everything changes at once.

Speaking of everything changing at once, it is back-to-school time, and for some of you—like Cheryl and I—you have a kid walking into a building they've never walked into, sitting with people they've never met, experiencing a bigger world than they have known. Anyone remember what that felt like? Your first day of school, first day of middle school or high school? Man, it's such a mix of anxiety and anticipation, right?

But it's bigger than backpacks. It's a new job. A new baby. A first home. A wedding ring. A new church. The last kid pulling out of the driveway with a U-Haul and a mattress bungee-corded to the roof. It's retirement. It's any season where there's promise but there's also uncertainty, excitement but also fear.

SO, here's my one-sentence pitch for this whole thing: ***Everybody's got one.*** And no, I don't mean belly buttons. Everybody is either standing in a season of change right now, or you just came out of one, or one is coming for you whether you scheduled it or not. So, I want to walk you through what Scripture actually says to do when the ground under your feet is ground you've never stood on before.

I'm calling this opening installment:

You Have Never Been This Way Before.

That's Joshua 3:4, you have never been this way before. AND since we have never been this way before let's talk about the reality behind every big opportunity that comes knocking. AND we all know this, but we still get seduced by it. Every big transition gets sold to us as a highlight reel. Right?

Think about it. When you took the new job, they showed you the office and the title and the number on the offer letter. When you found out you were having a baby, everybody sent you the onesie and the little socks that fit on your thumb. When you got engaged, it was the ring and the photos and the hashtag. When you went on the dorm tour the brochure is beautiful. And you should enjoy the brochure—God loves to give His children good gifts.

But come on, the brochure has a shelf life. And it's often shorter than we think. Because the brochure never shows you year two! The brochure for the new job doesn't mention the meetings. Specifically, the meetings about the meetings, and the follow-up email summarizing the meeting you were all just in. The brochure of the baby leaves out the part where this seven-pound human has personally decided that sleep is for the weak. The brochure for marriage doesn't include the fight about the thermostat or toilet seat position. Can I get an “amen” from someone in the house today. In every new season or opportunity, after the excitement wears off, the reality sets in.

SO, as we lay the ground work for this, I want to give you some language. There was a man named William Bridges who spent his whole career studying this stuff, and he made a distinction I think is so helpful. He said there's a difference between **CHANGE** and **TRANSITION**. Change he said:

Change is external

It's situational. It's the event, the move, the diploma, the new job, the ring on your finger. Change happens TO you, and it happens on a date you can circle on a calendar. But transition?

Transition is internal

Transition is the slow, disorienting work of your soul catching up to your circumstances. If change happens to you, then transition is what happens IN you. And here's the thing, the change is usually quick, but the transition takes a while. You can change your address in an afternoon, but it takes a lot longer for your heart to move in. Right?

You move into the new house, every box is unpacked, the pictures are hung, and six months later they're still reaching for the light switch on the wrong wall. The change was done in a weekend, but the transition took a year. My point is your body shows up to your new reality long before your soul agrees to live there.

So, as we explore these seasons of New Ground I want us to keep this in the front of our minds:

Change is what happens TO you.

Transition is what happens IN you.

Say that with me a couple times...

AND where some of you are living today is in that gap between the two! On paper, you made it. You got the thing—the title, the ring, the baby, the new job, the retirement you saved thirty years for. And everybody keeps walking up to you saying congratulations BUT underneath the smile and “thank you” there's this quiet voice going, “Then why do I feel like a stranger in my own life? Why am I standing in the middle of the very thing I begged God for, and I feel completely lost?”

AND that is the challenging thing about a new season. The most challenging part of New Ground is not the taking of the new ground. The hard part is that you are standing somewhere you have never stood, being someone you have never been, and nobody gave you the map!

BUT what I love about our God is that God knew how we would feel, and in Joshua 3, He addresses this for a couple million terrified people standing at the edge of the Promised Land without the only leader they have known.

As we dive into the text, write this down, this is the first big takeaway truth today, you have to:

1. Name the water.

Write that down. Name the water. As you do that we will put Chapter 3, verse 4 back on the screens. God tells them why He's giving them these instructions, He says:

⁴ Then you will KNOW WHICH WAY TO GO, since you have never been this way before.

I love that God says it out loud. He doesn't pretend it's familiar. He doesn't say, “Come on, you've crossed rivers and seas before, you'll figure it out.” No! He names it, this is new, you've never done this.

I think a lot of us are walking around exhausted because we won't do what God just did. We won't name it! We keep treating a brand-new season like it's a season we already

know how to run, and then we feel like failures when our old playbook doesn't work. Of course it doesn't work. You've never been this way before!

There's a Stanford neuroscientist named Robert Sapolsky, and he wrote a book with maybe the best title I've seen in a long time, it's called "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers." That's awesome, right? But in the book he discovers that a zebra out on the savanna only runs the full stress response when there's an actual lion. Like a lion shows up, the adrenaline floods, the zebra sprints for its life—and then, get this, twenty minutes later it's back to calmly eating grass like nothing happened! The stress response switches all the way off! Touch your neighbor and tell them, "I am not a zebra..."

BUT you wish you were now because humans don't need a lion! We can lie in bed and manufacture the entire stress response over a lion that might show up next Monday. Amen? Sapolsky's argument is that the human stress system was built for short, sharp, physical emergencies BUT we've somehow learned to leave it running for weeks and months at a time over things that haven't even happened yet and it quietly makes us sick.

All of that to say this: Your nervous system would rather have a definite disaster than an open question. Your body can actually handle a known lion. What grinds it down to nothing is the uncertainty.

I pray a lightbulb is coming on for someone today because this explains so much. It explains why good opportunities can still wreck you. You'd think a promotion would just feel like a party. But your brain doesn't file it under "party." Your brain files it under "I don't know what this is yet," and it starts firing the same alarms it fires for danger. AND someone needs to hear this... that's not a lack of faith. That's the nervous system doing exactly what God built it to do. The problem isn't that you're anxious in the transition. The problem is you think you're not supposed to be!

Oswald Chambers (the famous devotional writer) said it like this:

"Certainty is the mark of the commonsense life; gracious uncertainty is the mark of the spiritual life."

Did you catch that? Not certainty. Gracious uncertainty! Not knowing every step. A settled trust that holds even when you can't see.

So, naming the water is the first act of faith, not the last resort. When you say out loud, "I have never been here before, and I don't know the way" —that's not you giving up, that's you finally telling the truth. And the truth is the only ground God builds anything on!

I'll push this one step further for you. Naming the water means is not just admitting you have never been here, BUT it's admitting something **DIED**! Go back to how the Book of Joshua opens:

After the **DEATH** of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them.

Before God ever says "cross," a funeral has happened. And that's not just Israel's story. Every new season has small and large deaths in it. The version of you that knew how to do life, that guy is gone. The rhythm that used to work, the role you used to play, the address you used to drive to on autopilot. Small things and large things all die so you can stand where you're standing now on New Ground.

You cannot cross a river you refuse to admit you're at. So, name it. Say it to God this week, out loud, by yourself: "God, I've never been this way before. Somethings have ended. And I'm scared about what's next." Church, that is a prayer God hears every single time!

Look at chapter 3, verse 5 now. Watch what Joshua tells them to do the night before they cross. He tells the people:

"CONSECRATE yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do *amazing things* among you."

The word there for consecrate is the Hebrew word qadash [**kaw-DASH**]. It means to set apart, to prepare, to make ready. And notice the order. Consecrate yourselves *tonight*, because the amazing things come *tomorrow*. He didn't say do amazing things and then your heart will be ready. He said get your heart ready, and tomorrow I will move.

I will move and do "amazing things" which is literally the word for wonders or miracles. It's the same category of word you'd use for the plagues in Egypt or for the Red Sea splitting. God looks at a couple million people standing at a flooded river with no plan and He says: you don't need a plan. You need to be ready! Because tomorrow I'm doing something you'll tell your grandkids about!

SO, here's the actual assignment. Before you can cross into new ground, you have to get quiet enough to admit you're at the edge of it. Naming the water IS how you consecrate yourself. It's you saying, "God, I don't know the way, I'm scared, I am saying

goodbye to all these things, but I'm making my heart ready for whatever You do tomorrow."

Everyone say, "name the water." Which leads to the obvious question, **but I still don't know which way to go.** Right? What do I follow?

2. Follow the ark, not the map.

Write it down. Follow the ark, not the map... Meaning what exactly?

Read through this entire story in Joshua and look for what God does NOT give them. He never gives His people a map. In fact, find me the itinerary, the five-year plan, the little laminated card with the GPS coordinates on it. It's not there. God never hands Joshua any of that!

You know what He DOES hand them? Chapter 3, verse 3:

"When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. ⁴ Then you will know which way to go

Follow the ark. The ark of the covenant which was this ornate gold box that represented the presence of God among His people. God says: don't follow a *plan*, follow My *presence*! Where you see Me go, you go.

AND as a follower of Jesus since I was a child, can I be honest here, this is where I still get stuck after 40 years of faith. Over and over, I get to the edge of the water demanding a map, and God keeps offering me Himself, and I keep saying, "No, You don't understand, I need the MAP! I want the whole plan before I'll step into what's next. I want to know what's on the other river bank!" And do you know what God says every time? "I'm not giving you the whole plan. BUT I will give you My presence, all you have to do is follow Me one step at a time."

Here's a nugget that I learned that might help in these moments. What is the name of the guy leading the people across this flooded river here, hint the book is named after him? Right, Joshua. In Hebrew, that name is Yehoshua. Yehoshua means "Yahweh—the name of God—saves." Now when you carry that name across the centuries and into the New Testament and put it into Greek, do you know what Yehoshua becomes? It becomes Jesus.

Joshua and Jesus are the same name! SO, the man standing at the edge of the impossible water, leading terrified people onto ground they've never touched, he's

carrying the name of the One who does the exact same thing for you and me! The name over your crossing is the name of Jesus! He's led people across before! He knows where the water piles up! He is not nervous about your new ground! **AND He goes in FRONT of us!**

The ark went ahead of them. Verse 6:

⁶ Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on AHEAD OF THE PEOPLE." So they took it up and went ahead of them.

Whatever you're walking into this fall, Jesus is not behind you yelling directions like a dad who won't pull over and ask. No! He's out in front! He's already in the deep part! Amen?

AND here's a detail we skim right past. God tells them to keep about a thousand yards between them and the ark. A thousand yards, that's over half a mile. If every detail in Scripture matters, why this one? Some scholars say reverence, and sure, the ark was not to be messed with. But here's the practical genius of it: if you keep that much distance, **everybody can see it!**

A couple million people can't all crowd around one gold box. But back up half a mile, and now the whole nation—front to back—can lift their eyes and see exactly where God is going. God spaced Himself out so that no matter where you're standing in the crowd, you can see the presence out ahead of you!

Today, you may feel like you're in the back of the crowd. Like everybody else got a front-row seat to what God's doing and you're stuck behind a bunch of taller more spiritual people. Hear me, lift your eyes! He put Himself where you could see Him from no matter where you find yourself today!

Turn to somebody next to you and tell them, "Lift your eyes."

Because here's the truth, a map can't love you! A map doesn't know your name, doesn't go first, doesn't stay when it gets hard, doesn't come back for the stragglers! A map is just information. But the ark? The ark is a Presence. And when you're walking into something you've never faced, you don't ultimately need more information. You need Someone with you! You've been asking God for a better map when He's been offering you Himself the whole time!

AND here's why this is such good news, and not just a nice thought. Tim Keller said it about as well as it can be said. He said:

God will only give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything He knows.

Read that again... If you knew what God knows, every outcome, every consequence, every hidden thing, you would ask for exactly what He's giving you. That's why you don't need the map. The map assumes YOU know what's good for you. The ARK assumes He does! And between the two, I'll take the one Who knows everything, going first, every single time!

So, this week, stop asking God for the whole route and start asking a smaller, better question: ***God, where are You already moving in this?***

You don't need the far bank. You just need the next place to put your eyes. Follow the ark, not the map... Which brings us to the hardest part. Because seeing where God's going and actually stepping in are two very different things. One more takeaway:

3. Get your feet wet.

Write it down... Because here's the moment the whole story turns on, and if you blink you'll miss it. Verse 15. Catch the timing, because the timing is the miracle:

¹⁵ Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest.

Flood stage. Not a nice, calm, ankle-deep creek you could hop across in your church shoes. The Jordan during harvest season overflowed its banks. Meaning this is the absolute worst, most dangerous, most impossible time of year to cross that river. AND that's when God says go.

Stop and think about how unreasonable that is. God had every option. He could've dried up the riverbed first, THEN said cross. He could've waited three months for the dry season. He could've done the easy, sensible thing, that's what I would've asked for. "Lord, could You just take the water down first, and then I'll happily wade across." God says, "No, you step in, and THEN I will move it."

Keep reading, rest of verse 15:

Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, ¹⁶ the water from upstream stopped flowing.

Did you catch the order? The river didn't part and then they walked across, this isn't the Red Sea 2.0. No, they walked in, and then the river parted. God waited until they stepped into the flood waters carrying a heavy gold box, with no evidence, nothing but a

promise. And the second their toes hit the current, upstream, miles away, at a town called Adam, the water stopped.

That's the pattern of God, church, and once you see it you'll see it everywhere. God mostly, mostly moves AFTER the step, not before it. He honors the wet foot, because there is a whole miracle just upstream of you that is waiting on you to stop negotiating from the bank.

AND I get it. I know why we stay on the bank. Because getting your feet wet means obeying before you have the evidence. It means doing the thing God said while the water is still high.

Some of you have been standing at the edge of a new season for months now, and you've named the water, and you can even see the ark, you know where God's going, but you will not get your feet wet, because you're waiting for the river to go down first. You're waiting to feel ready. You're waiting for the fear to leave before you move.

Let me save you some time: **the fear is not leaving before you move.** The fear leaves *because* you moved.

On July 20th, 1969, Neil Armstrong is climbing down a ladder onto the surface of the moon, a surface no human being has ever touched. Nobody had ever put weight on that ground. Nobody knew for sure what would happen when he did. And he says the line, "One small step for man" and he steps off the ladder onto brand-new ground. And it held him! But the step is what proved it would.

AND that's how it works. You don't get to test the ground first and then step. You step, and the stepping is the test, and the holding is the miracle.

And again, I want to be honest with you because I don't want to make this sound easy. When those priests stepped into that water, the water had not moved yet. Read it again. There was a moment, a blink of an eye, a beat of the heart, where they were standing in a flooded river with wet feet and nothing had changed. The promise had not come true yet.

Some of you are in that exact second right now. You obeyed. You made the hard call, you stepped toward the new season, and so far all you've got to show for it is wet feet and a river that hasn't budged. God sent me to tell you today; don't you dare step back onto the bank! Just because you can't see it stopping doesn't mean it isn't already piling up in a heap at a town called Adam. Stay in the water! Stay in the water!

You've never been this way before! Nobody's telling you the ground you're about to step on is familiar. It's not. It's new ground. But the ark's already out there in the deep part.

Jesus, whose name has been on this crossing the whole time, is already in the middle of the river standing on dry ground, waiting for the rest of the family to come across.

So, get your feet wet! Make the call you've been avoiding! Have the conversation! Show up to the thing that terrifies you! Say yes to God on the new season instead of waiting until you feel qualified, because you are never going to feel qualified!

The water won't move till your foot's in it! So, put your foot in it!

Let me bring this in for a landing. This is just the opening, and we've got a lot more ground to cover, BUT if today you're not sure where you stand with God—maybe church is your new ground. So, hear me. You don't have to have your life figured out to come to Jesus. You don't need the map. You just have to be willing to take one step toward the water, and He does the rest. That's the whole gospel. He went first. He's already in the river. He crossed the hardest water there is, He went through death itself and came out on dry ground on the other side so that you would never have to cross alone. Take a step in His direction today!

For those of you who've walked with God a long time, here is your homework, wrestle with this question:

Where have I been standing on the bank because I can't see the other side?

What's the season, the New Ground, God's been telling you to cross into, and you keep waiting for the water to go down? Maybe today He's asking for your foot. And maybe the reason He's asking is that there's a whole crowd behind you who will never step in until they watch you do it first. Somebody's waiting on your obedience to give them permission for theirs.

SO, **name the water**. Tell God the truth about where you are instead of pretending you know the way. **Follow the ark, not the map**. Stop demanding the plan and start watching for His presence out ahead of you. And then you **get your feet wet**. Take the one step you can see even before the fear leaves.

AND don't miss how the story ends. Verse 17:

¹⁷ The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on **DRY GROUND**, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on **DRY GROUND**.

Let that preach to you. The thing you are most afraid of right now, God doesn't just want to get you past it. He wants to turn it into the ground under your feet. He takes the **FLOOD** and makes it a **FLOOR**.

You have never been this way before. But He has. He's already out in the middle of the river, standing on dry ground, and He is not going anywhere until the whole family is across.

So come on. Let's get our feet wet!

[PRAYER TIME]