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Hello and welcome to this episode of the St. Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. Today we're going to be thinking about a topic that is very real, I think for all of us, I'm sure. And it's about how we overcome obstacles in the Christian life. Um, I guess all of us want to become better disciples. We want to have a closer walk with God, but time and time again, um, we get confronted with the fact that we, uh, we make bad decisions in life or we fall into sin or if you're anything like me, uh, I know I'm really weak in my spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study and fasting and, um, all those other disciplines and all of those sort of weaknesses, um, the bad decisions, the falling into sin, um, the lack of discipline, uh, in my spiritual life - all of these, um, seem to be like obstacles or barriers that, uh, prevent us from moving into a deeper relationship with God or living out the Christian life with as much discipline as we want to.

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Um, and the life of faith can be very much like that, can't it? We, we want to be faithful to God. We want to be strong. Uh, we want to be a really good witness to God. But time and time again, we seem to, um, let ourselves down through our weaknesses. Um, we can't seem to overcome the obstacles in our personality that seem to stand in the way of us having that closer walk with God. So that's what we're going to be thinking a little bit about today. Now before we get into our, uh, Biblical text, uh, when I was, uh, thinking about this topic it reminded me of, um, uh, an event, uh, in my own life. Before I became a priest over 25 years ago, I was a warehouse manager for a major supermarket chain in the UK. And for part of my training, I had to go on a survival week, um, in a place in the UK called the Lake District.

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Um, it was a really a beautiful area. Um, but it was very cold and rugged and really hilly. Uh, it was, um, if, you know, the Lake District, it's such a beautiful place, but it's quite an unforgiving terrain to be under canvass for a week in winter. And, uh, anyway, we were there on this, uh, survival course for a week in the middle of January. And, uh, snow was on the ground and none of us really wanted to be there. We were desperate to get home. We were thoroughly fed up with the whole experience. And, um, on day three, uh, I had to lead the training program and, uh, what we had to do was to get from one part of the Lake District to another to pick up a mystery object. And it was a 15 mile walk through freezing fog. And my job was to work out how to get there, um, and lead the team.

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So we walked about five miles and everything seemed to be going okay. And then we found ourselves in the middle of a moor and the fog was so thick that we couldn't see, uh, more than about 10 foot in front of us. But I looked at the map and I saw that if we followed a particular stone wall, we would soon get to where we wanted to be. So I told the team to go in single file, keeping one hand on the wall and then we'd all get to where we needed and no one would get lost in the fog. Now that was a brilliant idea. Um, but there was only one thing I forgot to check and it turns out we all had our hands on the wrong wall and we walked for more than two hours in the fog and the ice and the snow

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and we walked in a huge circle and ended up exactly where we started. Now, I'm not going to tell you, uh, what the team said to me, uh, but they weren't exactly suggesting that I apply for a promotion, I can assure you! And that was a lesson, uh, for me about life, which is that sometimes despite all the best laid plans and all our best efforts, uh, sometimes our lives seem to go round in circles, don't they? No matter how much we try to move forward, sometimes we find ourselves, um, right back where we started. And that can be true for the plans that we make in life. And it can also be true for our spiritual lives. Our prayer lives, our dedication to worship and reading the Bible, uh, very often we don't seem to make any progress at all. Just heading round and round in circles and we think, ah, if only, if only I could get this one thing right.

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If only I could deal with this one barrier, this one obstacle, um, then everything in my spiritual life will be okay. If only I can get this one aspect of my personality sorted out. Or if only I could find more time, then I could get on with my Christian life. If I could escape from the habit of swearing or if only I didn't love to gossip so much, or if I could pray more, pray better, pray more sincerely if only...whatever...then I could become a real Christian, a better Christian. And I guess many of us are held hostage by a particular sin that we keep committing, or a particular way of behaving that we know is wrong or a particular way of thinking that we know is ungodly. But no matter how hard we try, we just can't seem to get off first base and do anything about it. So we're going to think about that, uh, in this podcast. And to do that, we're going to be focusing on a really great passage from the Old Testament. It's Joshua 3:1-9. So let's see what we can learn from this passage about overcoming those obstacles in the Christian life.

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Well, let me remind you of the story, uh, in Joshua and give you a little bit of context to chapter three. The Israelites, uh, you may remember had spent 40 years wandering around the desert. They'd been waiting to enter the Promised Land, uh, their inheritance from God. And Moses had died. And God raised up Joshua as the new leader. And his task was to prepare the people to enter the Promised Land. And Joshua sent out spies to do a reccie and they came back and they said, "Yep, it's all ready - we can take it whenever we want to". And so after wandering around for 40 years, the people of Israel, um, are now poised to enter the Promised Land. They're excited. It's just over the horizon. It's a few kilometers away. And the only thing that stands between them and their inheritance is the Jordan River. This one last barrier before their new life with God.

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So on one side there's, um, a cold desert experience. And on the other side, uh, there's a land flowing with milk and honey, the fulfillment of all their dreams. So they are standing on the edge of something new. Uh, God is with them and Joshua is leading them confidently. But in their minds, there's still one nagging doubt. Because if you know the scriptures that they, that they've been this close before. If you read in Numbers 25, less than a generation before they been at Acacia in the same place, and they could have entered the Promised Land then. But what happened? They fell into disobedience. And they turned away from

God. They came so close to entering into God's blessings, but because of their sin, they were denied the blessing and they stayed in the wilderness. And now here they are again at Acacia. After all these years it's as if they've, they've gone full circle and they've now got another chance to put it right and enter the Promised Land.

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So just the Jordan River to cross. If they could get over this one last obstacle in their spiritual life, uh, then everything will be alright. But the truth is they knew that they had come to the end of their resources. Um, they had done everything they could, but there was seemingly, uh, no way to cross the river in their own strength using their own initiative. Uh, there weren't any bridges. They didn't have any tools or equipment. And what's more, in verse 15 of Joshua Chapter Three, it tells us that the river was in flood. It was running fast and wide. It was impenetrable. So nothing short of a miracle would get them across that river. Um, as we look at our own lives and attitudes and behaviors, uh, we know, don't we, that it would take a miracle for us to change as well. Well, how did they cross the Jordan and how do we tackle those things that, um, stand between us and God? How do we claim God's blessings in our lives and enter our Promised Land? Uh, the answer of course, is going to be different for each one of us as, uh, a different answer for each set of issues. But there are some guiding principles which, um, apply to all of us just as they applied to the Israelites all those years ago.

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And the first principle that we need to consider when we're trying to, um, address how to overcome obstacles in our spiritual life, our own spiritual development is, firstly, we need to recognize that God is with us. When our daughter Rebekah was a child, uh, she used to come into our bed at night because she was frightened of the dark. But when she cuddled up next to us, she could always sleep perfectly well. So it wasn't actually the dark that she was afraid of. Instead, she was actually afraid of being alone. And that's so true of us too, isn't it? Often um, it's not the problems in life that we face that scare us so much as the idea of facing our problems alone. But the wonderful truth that we cling to as Christians is that even in the darkest night when we go through our most difficult times, we are never ever alone. God is always with us.

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You'll remember Jesus' last words before he ascended to heaven and he said, "I'm with you always, even to the end of the age" and through the power of the Holy Spirit, he is with us. God is always with us through his Spirit. Uh, we are never alone. And we see the symbol of God's presence with his people in Joshua 3:2, where Joshua orders the people to follow the Covenant Box. He said, "When you see the priest carrying the Covenant Box of the Lord your God, break camp and follow them". And this Covenant Box was for the people of Israel, the symbol of God's presence in their midst. And it contained a piece of manna, symbolizing God's provision in the wilderness. And it also contained, um, Aaron's rod symbolizing God's authority over them. So it was a holy object. It was a sign of God living in their midst.

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And if we want to, um, overcome those seemingly insurmountable obstacles that, uh, hold us captive in life, the first step is for us to follow God, to remain in his presence. Wherever God goes, uh, we must follow. Uh, we are never going to overcome spiritual difficulties in our own strength, but we can only ever begin to overcome our spiritual difficulties, uh, by remaining in the presence of God because then through his Holy Spirit, we will be given strength to overcome. But how do we actually go about doing that? Well, I think the answer comes in verse nine of Joshua 3, where Joshua says, "Come here and listen to what the Lord your God has to say". Now, there's two directives here. The first is "Come here". Joshua calls his people to meet together in the name of God. And it's true for us as well.

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We need to keep meeting together. Um, church attendance needs to be a regular habit. Uh, if we don't seek out fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters, we're always gonna make it harder for ourselves to live in God's presence. If we don't continually seek out fellowship with one another, then we're going to find it harder to overcome problems in our spiritual lives. Uh, coming to church isn't a hobby to dip in and out of. It should be the foundation to living with Christ. Uh, church isn't an optional extra because when we meet together, uh, we can share and carry one another's burdens. Uh, we can gain strength from the fellowship we enjoy and we can also realize afresh, you know, that we're not alone. Uh, you know, we are with God and there's also a whole company of people who are going to be there to support us and encourage us in our walk with God.

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But in verse 9 as well, it says, "Come here and listen to what the Lord your God has to say." "Listen to what the Lord your God has to say". Um, if we want to overcome obstacles in our spiritual lives, we must listen to the word of the Lord. The Bible contains all that we need for a revelation of God. It is sufficient for all of our needs. So we recognize then that God's presence with us has these two components. There's a human component, um, which means coming to church regularly. And then there's a divine component, which is searching the Bible for God's word to us. Now, neither of these components are gonna ever take our problems away or eradicate those obstacles in our spiritual lives. But they will help us to get them into perspective and give us the foundation for moving forward with God. So we need the support of one another. We need the support of God. And so the first principle in overcoming those obstacles is to recognize that God is always with us.

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And then secondly as we address the obstacles, um, that we want to overcome in our spiritual lives, we need to recognize that God wants us to be obedient. Now we live in an instant society, don't we? It's a sort of drive through world, an X-factor world in which waiting for things and working towards things, uh, seems increasingly difficult. Uh, I think sadly that attitude, uh, permeates so much of Christianity as well. Uh, we want God to work and we want him to work now. Um, arrow prayers, uh, sound very spiritual. Just what, you know, when we pray quickly for something on the spot. And they, they do have a place in our lives, I know that, but, but that notion of arrow prayers, um, is no excuse, um,

for not finding time each day for prolonged and concentrated prayer. Um, the truth is, and it's it's hard for all of us to hear, is that God wants people who will work hard at their faith over a long period of time.

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Um, and if we consecrate ourselves to God in that way and we really try to be obedient and prayerful, uh, and develop in, in patience, um, and work hard at our spirituality, uh, then he will do great things in us and through us. Um, this notion of purifying ourselves is a continuous action. Um, Joshua, uh, implies in this passage that, um, the people need to purify themselves before God. But he's not saying that, um, we need to be pure and holy before we receive God's blessing. Um, if we've even made a start and we're trying our best to be obedient, um, even though we may fail time and time again, if the intent is there, if the motivation is there, God will honor that and he will pour out his blessings on us. So as we move towards God in holiness and obedience, so God moves towards us and those things that have held us hostage, you know, the power of sin and temptation will all begin to fade away, uh, in scale and importance. So we firstly, then need to recognize that God is with us. Um, secondly, we need to recognize that God wants us to be obedient, um, and for us to keep on, uh, persevering in prayer and that process of purification. Um, but there's also really important third step too, if we want to overcome the obstacles in our spiritual lives.

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And that, oh, so important third step is simply this, that we need to expect God to work miracles in us. Now it's easy to forget that God is in the business of miracles and he wants to give us more than we ever think of asking for. Uh, God longs for us to know his forgiveness. He longs for us to know, peace and joy in our hearts. Uh, he longs for the sick to be healed and for past hurts to be forgiven. God wants nothing more than to mend our broken relationships, and everything that you and I, uh, hope for in life, God is itching to give us, uh, according to his will. As Jesus reminds us in John 10:10, Jesus says, "I've come so that you may have life in all its fullness". But half the time we don't allow God the space to work in our lives because we don't really believe that he will.

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But what does Joshua say in verse 5 of Chapter Three? He says, "Purify yourselves..." (we just thought about that) "Purify yourselves because tomorrow the Lord will perform miracles among you". Now that is the promise to each one of us today. The same word to us as to the Israelites all those years ago. "Purify yourselves because tomorrow the Lord will perform miracles among you". So whatever it is that holds us hostage in life, we need to focus, um, not on the size of the problem, not on the size of the failing, but focus instead on the God of miracles. And for me, the greatest lesson of all from this passage then comes in verse 8, where Joshua says to the people, "Tell the priests carrying the Covenant Box, that when they reach the river, they must wade in and stand near the bank". Now can you believe that? The River Jordan was their greatest problem.

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It was the flood season. The banks were breaking and the current was strong. Joshua tells his people that they must wade in and stand near the bank. And it seems that God was not going to work his miracle until his people stepped out

in faith and waded in and got their feet wet. And therein lies the challenge for us, um, that in faith we need to wade in and get our feet wet and allow God to do the rest. Now I wonder what your Jordan River is. Um, is it a personal weakness that you have? Is it an unstable temperament? Um, is it, uh, this sin that you just continually revisit and revisit? Is it, uh, an unwillingness to spend time in prayer or Bible study? Um, is there a, um, uh, an inability to work on forgiving someone else? Uh, you know, what is your Jordan River?

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What is it that is the obstacle, uh, that stands in the way of your spiritual growth? What is it that God wants you in faith to wade into and start addressing? We can only do that in faith. If we fix our eyes on God and step out in faith, we know that he will be faithful. He will honor us and he will, um, bring us the healing that we need to, um, become stronger as disciples of Christ. Uh, we don't need to stay in the wilderness. Uh, the future needn't be a repetition of the past. And there's a lovely a promise of God in Isaiah 43:1-3, and I'm just going to read these verses to you and you might want to maybe close your eyes and um, allow these words to wash over you: "The Lord who created you says, 'Do not be afraid. I will save you. I've called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you. Your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burned. The hard trials that come will not hurt you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy God of Israel who saves you. You are precious to me. Do not be afraid for I am with you!'"

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So I hope you've found that a, um, useful podcast today. If you want to carry on the conversation, then please do email me steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Uh, check on our website standrewsenfield.com and our Facebook page is St Andrew's Enfield. Uh, please do subscribe to these podcasts and tell other people about them so that we can continue to grow together as a learning community. And wherever you are, whatever you're doing today, um, particularly if you're trying to deal with a, a real obstacle in your spiritual life right now, my hope and my prayer is that you will remember God's presence with you, uh, and that you will get all the support you need from the Christian community, that you'll be able to put things in perspective and develop something of the discipline to purify yourselves and know God's power at work in you, so that you will then be in a position to, uh, praise God for his healing and his strength and the work of his Spirit in your life, uh, strengthening you and helping you to fulfill your destiny as his child. So I hope that you will, um, feel God's closeness to you today and that you will know, just how much you are loved by him. Bye.