

Congratulations on making it this far in life! Don't listen to any of the haters—the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years are an amazing time. You spent the last few years *learning how* to think and make decisions for yourself, to make your faith your own and not just something that your parents or friends do. Now, you are really *doing it*, whether you realize it or not. You will notice many of your friends starting to realize that it's up to each one of us to decide: will I walk with God or walk away from him? Temptations increase like crazy in the early high school years, but so do opportunities to make an impact for good. Have you ever had anyone tell you, "Just wait till you get to the *real* world"? Some authority figures love saying things like that: "You won't be able to get away with that in the *real* world!" Guess what? They're wrong! You already are in the real world! You are making real decisions every day that have real impact on yourself, on family members, on friends, and on eternity.

If you are taking the time to read this, then you are probably someone who does take their walk with God and involvement in fellowship seriously. That's awesome! You will be missed in junior high: at Blowout, AMP, Student Leadership, Camp, and wherever else you were involved. But now you have come to the end of one road and the beginning of another. The question is, will your spiritual life strengthen in this time or will it shrivel up and die? Will you hide in the shadows of all the big, scary upperclassmen, or will you give God the chance to show that he loves working through people like you? Why not go for it! This could be the time where you let your walk with God grow *deeper* and let your ministry to others grow *wider*.

There are two stories from the Old Testament that can help us understand how to make a transition into the next place where God is calling us. My hope is that after thinking through these accounts from God's word, you will be ready to hit the ground running in your high school group, conquering any fear or laziness or unbelief that could hold you back. One of these stories helps us see what *not* to do and the terrible results that follow. The other is a wonderful example of God's people courageously trusting him and seeing him come through in a big way.

## The Background

Before Jesus came, God's people were Jewish. And they weren't a collection of Jewish people who lived in different places all over the world. They were a single country, the nation of Israel. God had already told them their purpose, to bring a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:3). That blessing was going to come from one particular Israeli Jew: Jesus the Messiah. He would be God and man at once, and his mission would be to give his life for us.

Long before Jesus showed up, some 1450 years earlier, the Israelites were struggling to become the great nation God told them they would become. In fact, they were living down in Egypt and ended up getting taken over and forced into slavery for 400 years! It got so bad there that the Egyptians started killing the Israelite babies just because they thought there were too many of them! After that, God raised up a powerful leader named Moses, and he faithfully led the people out of there. He also gave the Egyptians quite a few nudges to convince them that they should let his people go—plagues which turned their water to blood, hailstones that crushed people and houses, insects that swarmed in thick clouds, and firstborn males who mysteriously fell dead. Then to top it off, the Israelites were able to escape Egypt once and for all because God miraculously stopped the flow of water in the Red Sea, making the water stand up like a huge wall. This left dry ground for the Israelites to walk straight out of Egypt and into freedom. The same trick, however, did not work so well for the Egyptians. The Egyptian army followed the Israelites into the dry river bed, but once the last Israelite was through, God let the water go and crush the Egyptian army.

The Israelites were free! Now what would they do with their freedom? God let them choose: trust him and get his protection, or turn against him and be on their own. They were on their way up to

the good land God had promised to them long ago, and they had all sorts of good reasons to trust in God:

- He showed them where to walk by putting a giant pillar of fire in front of them.
- He had just inflicted ten miraculous plagues on the cruel slave-driving Egyptians in order to set them free.
- He gave instructions to Moses to give to the people.
- He was miraculously giving them food, stuff called manna that just appeared on the ground every day for them to eat.

Seems like they had a lot of good reasons to trust God! However, they also had some considerations in their minds that made them unsure about this whole trusting-God thing. Here are some of the concerns they had:

- Change is hard: they had been slaves all their lives, and freedom could be difficult to get used to.
- They used to live in a good land, but now they were going to have to travel through a harsh desert before arriving at the Promised Land.
- They would have enemies to fight along the way.

So what would it be? Would they trust God and follow his lead, or would they be controlled by their fears and uncertainties?

### Tragedy at Kadesh

They made it through a lot of the desert area between Egypt and the Promised Land, which was called Canaan at the time. They had some major snags along the way, but God took care of them and sent one miracle after another to guide them and keep them safe. They arrived to a town just outside Canaan called Kadesh Barnea. There, God told Moses to send twelve spies into the land to check it out. Remember, *God had promised them the land*, so they weren't checking it out to see if they would be able to conquer it. Of course they would be able! God would be with them, and he comes through on his promises... but if only the Israelites would have understood that about God!

After exploring the land for forty days, the men returned to Moses, Aaron, and the whole community of Israel at Kadesh.... They reported to the whole community what they had seen and showed them the fruit they had taken from the land. This was their report to Moses: "We entered the land you sent us to explore, and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is the kind of fruit it produces. But the people living there are powerful, and their towns are large and fortified...."

But Caleb [one of the twelve spies] tried to quiet the people as they stood before Moses. "Let's go at once to take the land," he said. "We can certainly conquer it!"

But the other men who had explored the land with him disagreed. "We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!" So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: "The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. We even saw giants there.... Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too!" (Numbers 13:25-33)

Notice what the spies said? Only two of them, Caleb and later Joshua, said they should go up and conquer the land. All ten of the others said no way! The towns are strong, the people are warriors (not escaped slaves like the Israelites) and there were even giants there! We don't know exactly how huge these guys were that lived in Canaan, but their size really isn't the point. The fact was that **Almighty God promised the Israelites that he would give them that land, but the spies would only**

**believe what they could imagine on a human level.** They thought they would be crushed by the people in Canaan? How could that possibly happen if God was going to be right there helping the Israelites? But that's just it—the ten spies besides Caleb and Joshua *didn't really believe* that God was going to help them, and this thinking that completely factored out God spread through the whole group like a cancer.

Then the whole community began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. Their voices rose in a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!" they complained. "Why is the Lord taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and our little ones will be carried off as plunder! Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" (Numbers 14:1-3)

Unbelievable! Go back to Egypt? Where their children were being thrown into the Nile? A few verses later, they even make plans to kill Caleb and Joshua! After Moses pleads with God not to wipe out his people with a plague, they hear what the consequence will be for their choice to turn against the very God who had *just* rescued them out of slavery.

"You will not enter and occupy the land I swore to give you. The only exceptions will be Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. You said your children would be carried off as plunder. Well, I will bring them safely into the land, and they will enjoy what you have despised. But as for you, you will drop dead in this wilderness. And your children will be like shepherds, wandering in the wilderness for forty years. In this way, they will pay for your faithlessness, until the last of you lies dead in the wilderness. Because your men explored the land for forty days, you must wander in the wilderness for forty years—a year for each day, suffering the consequences of your sins." (Numbers 14:30-34)

Ouch! God was still going to follow through on his promises to get the Israelites into Canaan, but that wouldn't happen until that entire generation died out. So they geared up for *forty years* of wandering around in the desert! All of the adults who were there would eventually die out, and *then* Israel would get the land. They were presented with a new challenge, a new and better way of life than what they had always known, but they followed their own cowardice rather than their powerful God. It didn't matter to them that he had come through time and time again; they just wouldn't trust in his words over their feelings. Would they ever learn?

### **Victory at the Jordan**

The forty years of wandering did eventually pass, and so did Moses. Their new leader was Joshua, one of the original twelve spies who was faithful all along. He believed that the same God who sent plagues to free them from slavery, a pillar of fire to guide them in the desert, and manna for them to eat every day would also protect them from the Canaanites as they entered the land.

God had a plan. He would guide the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant, which was a big box that was used in their temple to symbolize God's presence. Then, the people would follow behind the Ark, going wherever God leads and doing whatever God calls them to do, no matter how impossible it seemed. If they could get it into their heads to trust him this time around, everything would work out wonderfully. They would see incredible miracles once again like they had seen when God was rescuing them out of slavery in Egypt.

Trusting in God was a two part process, and God described each part to them. First of all, "Joshua told the people, 'Purify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do great wonders among you'" (Joshua 3:5). This first step to making this transition count was an *internal step*, an act of the heart and

the mind. They were to *purify* themselves. The original word used for “purify” did not mean to clean off in some kind of outward way, but rather to be prepared for God’s special use. The Israelites needed to have their hearts prepared! If they just tried to waltz into this decision without deeply deciding in their hearts that they would go the full way, there would be trouble. After all, things were going to be a lot different for them if they made this step. Wandering through the desert might have sucked, but once they crossed into the land they were going to war. They might have gotten sick of the manna that they were eating, but once they crossed into the land they would have to raise their own food. Also, once they crossed into the land, there was no turning back. Once again, God was going to miraculously dry up a river so they could walk through... but he never said anything about how he would dry it up again so they could come back if they changed their minds! This was it, one of those big moments in life. It’s do or die, life or death, adventuring into the Promised Land or wasting away in the wasteland. They needed hearts that were ready!

Joshua told the Israelites, “Come and listen to what the Lord your God says. Today you will know that the living God is among you. He will surely drive out the Canaanites.... Look, the Ark of the Covenant, which belongs to the Lord of the whole earth, will lead you across the Jordan River! ... The priests will carry the Ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth. As soon as their feet touch the water, the flow of water will be cut off upstream, and the river will stand up like a wall.” (Joshua 3:9-13)

Does God want them to do the impossible here? *No, he wants them to believe that he can do the impossible if they would just believe what he promised!* Remember, God promised them this land (that’s why it’s called the Promised Land), so if they believed what God said, they would act on what he tells them to do rather than on their own fears. That’s where the second and final part of trusting God would come in. They didn’t only need to *purify themselves*, they would also need to *take action*! This is really the proof of whether or not they actually did purify themselves before, whether or not they truly decided in their hearts that they would go God’s way rather than shrink back in fear. And thank God, they get it this time!

So the people left their camp to cross the Jordan, and the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant went ahead of them. It was the harvest season, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks. But as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river’s edge, the water above that point began backing up a great distance away... until the riverbed was dry. Then all the people crossed over near the town of Jericho. Meanwhile, the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant stood on dry ground in the middle of the riverbed as the people passed by. (Joshua 3:14-17)

Great job this time around, Israel! Wow, what a nightmare it would have been if they had chickened out again, making them wait *another* forty years to enter the land! They took courage when they needed to most.

There is an important detail in this story. Did you notice when exactly God stopped the river from flowing and allowed the water to stand up like a wall? It wasn’t until after the priests got in the water! They had to show that they trusted in what God said, not just in what their eyes could see right in front of them. They had to remember that God’s word is trustworthy. And they had to trust God with their feet, not just with their words!

Were they crazy to do this? How safe were they standing there next to this monstrous wall of water that could fall at any second and crush them? What if God accidentally blinked or something? What if he let the water go for a second just to see what would happen? They would be fish food! Here

is the reality: *they were in the safest place in the world because they were right where God wanted them to be*. They weren't putting their trust in what they saw or what they felt. They put their trust in what they heard from God: he would give them this land. Right there, in the madness, in the chaos, right next to this churning mountain of water that was growing ever higher as God continued to hold the river back, this was where God had called them. That means that no power on earth or in hell could have done anything to harm them. They were safe. And so we read at the end of the story that "the whole nation of Israel had crossed the Jordan on dry ground" (Joshua 3:17).

### Our Times of Transition

So what does all of this have to do with us? Essentially, every time we come to a major life transition, we can either have a Kadesh Barnea experience or a Jordan River experience. Will we trust in what God says and move forward, or will we be enslaved by our own fears? The transition from your Junior High Cell Group to a High School Homechurch is one of those times. Just like the Israelites, you will need to take the two steps of trusting God. Will you decide in your heart that you are going to follow God's lead wherever he is taking you? That is the step of *purifying yourself*, letting God know that even if you have times where you screw up later, *right now is a time that you want to follow him*. Of course, it's Jesus' blood shed for us that purifies our souls. But our decision to do God's will no matter what purifies our thinking (Romans 12:1-2). It purifies us from having other influences blind us to what God wants to do through us. Remember Kadesh? Purifying themselves was exactly what the Israelites didn't do, and when their time came, they had no courage to take the land. Secondly, if you have decided to make that commitment to God that you are genuinely going to try to make this transition count, are you going to take action or just sit on your bum?

You might still be confused about what exactly it looks like to make this transition in a godly way, and that's okay! I'm sure the Israelites had no idea what God was going to do! They definitely didn't know that they were going to defeat a city full of warriors by walking in circles and yelling really loudly, even though that's the next thing they did after getting into the land (Joshua 6)! The point is that it is not always up to us to know exactly what to do. When it comes to these future decisions (like, "What will it be like in high school group?" "What will God call me to do?" etc.), it turns out *who* we know is more important than *what* we know.

Yet that brings up another big question. What is it we are supposed to keep in mind about God to make this transition into a new ministry successful? The Israelites were given certain promises: God said he would give them the land, fight their battles for them, and accompany them to watch over them as they traveled. But what about us? **What does God promise us that would make a difference in your transition to high school?** I think that's a very good question. In fact, it's such a good question that I don't want to spoil it by answering it. Instead, here's what you should do. With a mentor or a friend, look through passages in some of your favorite books of the Bible to find at least five promises that God makes that you should keep in mind during your transition. One is done for you as an example.

1. Hebrews 13:5-6- God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?"

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In addition to purifying themselves and believing God's promises, they also needed to take action. They needed to act on what God told them and get their feet wet (this story is where that phrase came from, by the way). Their action steps were obvious: take actual steps into the river! But what about you? What are some action steps you can take as you enter into a high school group? Here are some thoughts we have gathered from various people involved in student ministries. Can you think of any others?

1. **Get advice on choosing a group.** Go to a group where you see people really investing into each other's lives. One thing will be the same in every group you check out: there's a lot of them and only one of you. So don't go to a group thinking, "I'll go to this one because they really need me over here." Think instead, "If I show up ready to serve people, make friends, and share Christ, will this be a group that will help me become a better leader for Christ?" There is a lot that could be said about choosing a group, more than we have time to discuss in this paper. So remember the key point above—get advice from some godly people!
2. **Immediately try to get to know the people in the group that you are checking out.** You might only be there for the night, but still, you are a servant of Christ, not a tourist! Ask people questions about their lives and show that you care right from the get-go.
3. **Immediately look for ways to serve the people in the group that you are checking out.** If you are just there to see if people serve you, you will miss out on a great opportunity to have God work through you! "Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity" (1 Tim. 4:12).

4. ***Immediately look for ways to contribute to the high school meeting.*** Why not pray with the group or throw out an answer to a discussion question? The older students will think it's so awesome that you are already trying to make an impact there! Or maybe if the idea of speaking up freaks you out, you could find another way to contribute, like helping clean up, or introducing yourself to someone who is by himself.
5. ***Bring your non-believing or uncommitted friends to check out high school groups with you.*** High school homechurches are awesome, so why wait to invite out friends who need to hear about Jesus? Don't wait until you have built a reputation in the group. Instead let your reputation be the person who is always trying to share Christ with others!
6. ***"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything"*** (Phil. 4:6). Don't freak out about where you should go or what you should do. Rather, *take action* on those thoughts by *actually talking to God about them*. Tell him everything you are worried about. He loves when we do this, and it will give you a ton of peace!
7. ***Be there for your other freshman friends who are freaking out!*** If someone doesn't take the advice of point six above, you could be the one to help them chill out and trust God during this transition. Don't give up on them, yell at them, or get annoyed with them. Instead teach them to handle it like you are, by bringing your concerns to God in prayer.

God is with you on this journey! Remember the promises that he has made to you. If you keep them in mind, and if you decide that you are going to do whatever God calls you to do, and if you take action steps, this transition into a high school group could be the most spiritually powerful time of your life. We spend a lot of time thinking and praying for all of you, not just that you would all make it into high school groups, but that you would hit the ground running! Why wait to make an impact in your new group until it feels more comfortable? Where is the excitement in that? Why not trust God right away and have a Jordan River experience! The opportunity is right in front of each one of you! If you take it seriously, God will work powerfully through your freshman class, transforming people's lives and leaving a mark for God's kingdom that lasts for all eternity.