

# Crossing the River Jordan

By Sarah Collinge

Crossing the River Jordan is frequently used as a metaphor in songs and literature to describe escaping slavery by “crossing over” from bondage to freedom.

The metaphor comes from the biblical story that describes the Israelites’ flight from slavery in Egypt. Led by Moses, the Israelites escaped Egypt after nearly 400 years of slavery. They traveled across the Red Sea and through the desert. The Israelites were searching for the **Promised Land**—the land God promised them. In order to enter the Promised Land, the Israelites had to cross the River Jordan.

**The Promised Land:** any longed-for place where one expects to find greater happiness or the fulfillment of a promise.

Even though God had promised this land to the Israelites, many doubted whether God would fulfill His promise. After wandering the desert for 40 years in search of the Promised Land, they worried that God had forgotten about his promise to them. They also were worried and anxious about the many obstacles that stood in their way.

One of the major obstacles was the river itself. When the Israelites arrived at the Jordan River, it was during flooding season. The river was at its highest level. The Israelites doubted whether they would be able to cross the river. God provided a miracle at the River Jordan; He parted the waters so that the Israelites could walk across dry land.

The message in the biblical story is that God *does* follow through with His promises. To cross the River Jordan, the Israelites had to stop worrying—they had to put their trust in God. The Israelites showed that they trusted God when they stopped feeling anxious and afraid. Instead of thinking about their fears, they showed strength and courage.

This biblical story gave the American slaves inspiration and hope. They believed that they could achieve their freedom just as the Israelites did. Slaves recognized that there would be obstacles and hardships but that if they remained faithful, God would fulfill His promise. American slaves gathered strength and courage from the biblical message.

The northern states became known as the American slave’s Promised Land. The Ohio River, which separated the North from the South, became known as the River Jordan.

**The River Jordan:** the last obstacle on one’s quest for freedom.

You can find reference to the Promised Land and the River Jordan in many famous songs, speeches and works of literature.

Consider the significance of the reference to the Promised Land in Martin Luther King’s last speech, when he says,

*We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountain top...And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land...So I'm happy tonight, I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man...*

You can view this speech at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0FiCxZKuv8>.

**What do you think Martin Luther King's message is?**