

Joshua: 3:1-17

Going After the Ark of the Covenant

When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God...go after it – v. 3

What a difference a generation makes! Some 40 years earlier at a place called Kadesh-Barnea the Israelites had been given the command by the Lord to enter Canaan but that generation did not have the faith or the courage to follow the Lord's command. The punishment for their unbelief was to wander in the wilderness until that entire generation of unbelievers perished in that same wilderness.

Now a generation later the children of those that perished in the wilderness are ready to enter Canaan. I find it somewhat ironic that the very ones that would have been put to death had the Israelites stayed in Egypt would prove to be the same ones that would conquer the promised land. The irony is found in how often their parents had complained that Moses had brought them into the wilderness to perish along with their children. How soon they forgot that had they remained in Egypt their children would have perished. Now those same children which would have been targeted for destruction rise up to become arguably the greatest generation in the history of Israel.

How often I've had occasion to pray that our children would grow up to have the faith and the courage to do great things for God. Oh that an up and coming generation of Christians would do so much more for Christ than the generation that has preceded them. One of the things that could contribute to the formation of such a generation of Christians is found in the words of our text in v. 3. *When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.* Or if I could abbreviate the text somewhat we might read it this way *When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God...go after it.*

Go after it! – that's the Lord's command and it should be our watchword. Go after it! This word applies not only to an up and coming generation but it can readily apply to all of us. We must, of course, understand such a text in the full light of divine revelation. We know that the ark of the covenant was a picture of Christ. It was made out of common wood which pictures Christ's humanity. But that wooden box was covered within and without with pure gold which portrays for us Christ's deity. Inside the ark could be found the two tables of the law which serves to remind us that the law of God was in the heart of Christ and He rendered perfect obedience to that law. On top of the ark was the mercy seat. This seat or this lid was to be sprinkled with blood on the day of Atonement. This serves to remind us that our sins have been paid for by the shed blood of Christ and God now deals with us in mercy because He can now be faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Going after the ark of the covenant, then, amounts to going after Christ. It amounts to a more fervent and earnest pursuit of Christ which in turn should lead to more fervent and earnest service to Christ. Here is a good word, then, to bring into a New Year. Here is a text that we can adopt as a good motto text for 2009. May it be a resolution that we'll all

see fit to pursue. *When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God... go after it.* I want to draw your attention to the theme that we can draw from this text – going after the ark of the covenant.

We Must Go After the Ark of the Covenant

And in the moments that remain I want to call your attention to the lessons we can draw from the narrative which will challenge and encourage us to go after the ark of the covenant – or to use New Testament terminology – to go after Christ. Consider with me first of all:

I. The Clear Means Revealed for Going After the Ark

Note how the text begins – *When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God.* Before the children of Israel could go after the ark they first had to see the ark. And I should note here that what we find in v. 4 is a command that contributed to their being able to see the ark. Note in v. 4 *Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go.*

I believe that this interval of space between the people and the ark served the purpose of enabling each person to see that ark for himself. Had there been no interval of space then there would have been many who would not have been able to see the ark of the covenant. They would have seen instead the backs of people in front of them who would have been blocking their view of the ark.

We can, of course, draw the application from such a scenario that we as Christians ought to do all we can to avoid blocking others view of Christ. We block their view of Christ when our lives send out different signals than what our professions of faith should convey. Self righteousness is something that can block another's view of Christ. If we convey to others a message that varies from the fact that we're only sinners saved by grace then we block their view of Christ. If we display a countenance that says *I'm holier than thou* then we block another's view of Christ. If, of course, we taint our testimonies with lives of flagrant sin then we also block another's view of Christ.

I remember some time ago while driving home in the car, I was listening to some call-in talk show on the radio in which a man called in and said he was a Christian. He was arguing in favor of some conservative political issue – pro-life perhaps. But for some strange reason he saw fit to inject into his language so much profanity that it made me sorry that the man kept insisting that he was a Christian. He certainly would have blocked the view of others from seeing Christ and in fact brought great reproach to the name of Christ by his words.

I remember even further back when I was first married and I worked for a man who ran a steel erection company. One particular project found us on a church site putting up the steel frame for some building that would be operated by a Catholic Church. One day a

priest came on to the site and got to talking with one of the men on the crew who happened to be Catholic. And in the course of their conversation this priest pulled a bottle of booze out from under his coat, took a big swig and then uttered some profanity. I suppose he wanted to impress the man he was talking to into thinking he was just like him but what he really did was block that man's view of Christ by a life of vain and vulgar profanity not to mention drunkenness and not mention wrong doctrine.

We are commanded in the New Testament to walk circumspectly which means walking carefully. We want to live our lives, in other words, with such care and consistency that we don't become the cause for others not being able see Christ or to see the truth that the gospel transforms the Christian's life and leads him to walk humbly with his God.

Before the Israelites could go after the ark of the covenant they had to see the ark of the covenant. The same thing holds in our pursuit of Christ. If we would go after Christ then we must behold Him. We must behold Him as He's revealed in the written word of God. And our approach to the Bible should be that we open and read our Bibles with the aim of beholding Christ. *Search the scriptures*, Christ says in Jn. 5:39 *for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.* And in Lk. 24:27 we read *And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.*

The book of God should bring us to Christ. We should behold His glory in the sacred page and we should hear His voice instructing us in the ways that are pleasing to Him as the Spirit of God impresses upon our hearts the things of God. And especially should we be moved to reverence and humility and praise and thanksgiving when we behold the very dying form of One who gave Himself for me.

If you're going to go after the ark of the covenant, then, you must see the ark – you must see Christ. I hope that having entered a new year you will take it upon yourself to be in the word of God. You cannot pursue Christ without pursuing the study of God's word. It is in His word that we see in a glass darkly and I think it would hold true that the greater our diligence in pursuing the study of His word the more fully we'll behold Him in that dark glass.

But would you note with me also that going after the ark means that we must be willing to remove from our place. Note again the words of our text: *When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.*

In the case of the Israelites the promised land was across the Jordan river. They could not remain where they were and go after the ark of the covenant. They had to get up and go, as it were. This would require effort on their part. As the book of Joshua so graphically depicts it – they would have to enter into warfare in order to follow the ark. That ark, you see, would lead them across Jordan, then it would lead them around Jericho. Following the ark required discipline and effort. They could not simply sit on their hands and know the Lord's blessing. They must instead remove from their place and go after the ark.

In the spiritual realm it's the same for you and me. If you would pursue Christ then it won't do to settle into a smug sort of complacency about where you are spiritually. You must remove from your place, spiritually speaking, in order to go after Christ. I'm afraid that it's too often the case with many Christians that they settle into a state of indifference. They conclude wrongly that there's no more advancement to take place in their lives. They settle on their lees as if to say that there's no necessity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

They may pursue other matters with great zeal. They may exert great time and energy in pursuing their careers or the advancement of their business. They can see plenty of room and plenty of potential for advancing in terms of what's available in the world. You may strive to advance in your income, you may strive to advance in the size house you own, you may strive to advance in the kind of car you drive or in terms of the many luxuries that the world may afford you. You're not willing to settle in your place where those things are concerned but all too many are willing to settle in their place when it comes to advancing spiritually. And so spiritual ambition and the zeal to pursue that ambition becomes sadly lacking. And in the end you actually lose ground spiritually rather than gain ground.

I wonder this morning how many of you are determined to gain ground spiritually in this new year? I wonder how many have the desire to pursue Christ by spending more time in the word, rather than less time. I wonder how many will spend more time in prayer instead of being satisfied that what little time you spend is adequate? I wonder how many will see the potential for advancement every time there's an opportunity to avail yourselves of the means of grace?

Certainly in times of revival the means of grace are pursued diligently. The church can't be opened enough. There aren't enough prayer meetings in the week – there aren't enough Bible studies to be attended – there aren't enough preaching times in which the gospel is proclaimed. One of the things that became apparent during the tour of the places that marked the 1859 revival in Ulster was that more places were needed and larger places were needed for prayer meetings and Bible studies.

We must be careful, however, not to blame our apathy on the fact that revival hasn't broken out. The Lord's word to us is to go after the ark which means go after Christ. And if we're going to pursue Christ then we must behold Him and we must remove from our place in order to go after Christ. We cannot pursue Him while we're settled in the place of indifference. May the Lord stir your hearts, then, to give heed to His word and go after Him.

There is one more factor that contributes to going after the ark, or going after Christ. Notice what we read in v. 5 *And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.*

Pursuing after Christ requires us to sanctify ourselves. The Israelites had to take the matter of heart preparation to heart in order to go after the ark. The question we must ask ourselves, then, is what does it mean for us to sanctify ourselves? Let me read for you

from our larger catechism question #75 What is Sanctification? *Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.*

Do you see how much is packed into the words of Joshua when he tells the Israelites to sanctify themselves? And so when we pursue Christ we must, in the power of the Holy Spirit stir up and strengthen the graces within ourselves with the aim of dying more and more to sin and rising to newness of life. We should, in other words, mortify the deeds of the body and lay hold on eternal life.

These are the means, then, by which we go after the ark of the covenant – or the means by which we pursue Christ. We must behold Him. We must also be careful to contribute to the way others behold Him rather than become obstacles to others beholding Him. We must remove from our places spiritually and we must sanctify ourselves. And these are exercises that must be practiced earnestly and consistently. *For he that cometh to God we're told in Heb. 11:6 must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.*

May the Lord help us, then, to go after Christ. May the Lord deliver us from being complacent in spiritual things. One of the burdens that weighs heavily upon me as we enter this new year is the burden for the people of this church to gain stronger desires for Christ. Oh that we may gain the desire of the Apostle Paul who knew Christ better than most but had the desire to gain more of Him still. May we gain the spiritual ambition of a Moses who after gaining so much from the Lord would nevertheless seek more and so would pray to the Lord *I beseech thee, show me thy glory.*

There are many reasons that could be named for making the pursuit of Christ our motto of the year. But let me stick to the text and point out from the text:

II. The Compelling Reason for Going After the Ark

Notice the words of v. 4 *Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore.*

The Israelites were about to embark on a path they had never trod. They were about to enter into new experiences. They were about to meet new challenges. There's a sense in which you could say they were about to enter into a realm of uncertainty. And I don't mean by that that there was doubt about the outcome. The Lord had promised them the land – the Lord had promised them victory – the Lord had promised them His presence. But it was uncertain in the sense that it was unknown. The usual routine was about to change and they were now going to have to prove the Lord in new and different ways.

It was an intimidating course that they were about to embark on – so intimidating that their parents didn't have the courage to attempt it. There were great obstacles to be overcome. There were walled cities and well fortified cities that would have to be conquered. And indeed the circumstances they faced were quite beyond them in their own strength. And if they were going to succeed where these new challenges and these unknown circumstances were concerned then they would have to follow the ark of the covenant of the LORD their God.

Keep this space of two thousand cubits between you and the ark Joshua is saying to them. Or in other words *maintain an unobstructed view of the ark that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore.*

I doubt if there would be anybody here this morning that needs to be convinced that we're headed into times of great uncertainty and great challenges. The economic downturn is real. We know it's real when we hear of one business after another either going under or making severe cutbacks in order to try to stay afloat. We know it's real when we learn of planned layoffs in the places you men work. What we don't know is just how far this downturn will go. Will we face a large-scale economic collapse that will resemble the Great Depression? Have the chickens come home to roost so that the corruption of many is being exposed and tragic result will be great financial disaster that will effect us in ways we don't know?

What effect will a new administration have on all these things? Will it only make matters worse? I heard one former political candidate say that our government spending programs are like telling a fat man who wants to lose weight that he needs to eat more donuts. Are we headed down a course that will force many to learn the hard way that the government is not the solution to their problems?

There are a good deal of uncertainties ahead of us and we are going to face challenges. I can think of no more fitting a text to apply to our immediate future than the words of v. 4 *ye have not passed this way heretofore.* And certainly the words that precede this statement describe our needs when we read *that ye may know the way by which ye must go.*

Isn't that what we need? Isn't that what we'll be looking to the Lord to provide? Lord, show me the way by which I must go. Show me the way by which my family must go. And the Lord will show you that way but it becomes essential for you in order for the Lord to show you the way that you go after the ark of the covenant – or that you pursue Christ.

Too often circumstances that are beyond us tempt us into thinking we have to pursue a course of our own making and choosing. I have to pursue what seems to be expedient and then assume that I'll have God's blessing anyway. And we take our eyes away from the ark or away from Christ and we become taken up with the things that are seen rather than the things that are unseen. The circumstances of life loom so large over us that they dominate our hearts.

During the week of prayer in Ulster I preached on this very kind of condition as it was found in the early church. In Acts 12 the chapter begins with James being executed and

Peter being imprisoned. And the church devotes itself to prayer for Peter and the Lord answers prayer by delivering Peter from prison. But when Peter shows up at the prayer meeting and knocks on the door and a young maid by the name of Rhoda reports to the others that Peter's at the door – those early Christians couldn't believe it. They go so far as to accuse the young damsel of being mad. They were exercising faith to pray and yet even in their praying their hearts were filled with unbelief. And I suggested that the reason for their unbelief was because the ominous circumstances they faced dominated their minds and hearts more than Christ dominated their hearts. And so much of the time that they were knocking on heaven's door in their praying, the answer to their prayers was knocking at their door – but they couldn't believe it.

This is why we must strive to maintain an unobstructed view of Christ. If we allow the fear of the future to dominate our hearts then we'll be ruled by panic or we'll be ruled by carnal pragmatism that in the end will cause us to lose out with God rather than go forward with God.

It was this very fear that prevented the previous generation of Israelites from entering the promised land. And how do we find them once this fear gained dominion in their hearts? We find them drifting in the wilderness. We find them angry against God. We find them longing to return to Egypt which is tantamount in our day to returning to the world. And in the process they become very poor parents. Their judgment becomes so twisted that they think the path of destruction is the path of security and provision for their children.

I hope you can begin to perceive, then, how compelling an argument is presented to us in the narrative for keeping our eyes on Christ and pursuing after Christ not less than we've been doing but more so. Now is the time to devote yourself in greater measure to prayer. Now is the time to increase in your knowledge of Christ. Now is the time to be cultivating a more intimate experience of Christ. Because now is also the time of great opportunity.

The Israelites under Joshua would soon do exploits and conquer the promised land. The insurmountable circumstances that their parents couldn't face would soon fall before them as they went after the ark of the covenant of the LORD their God.

And it's always during the times that appear to present the greatest challenges and the greatest adversities that the people of God find the opportunity to shine most brightly for Christ. Oh we're concerned for the future especially when we can't help but see how much uncertainty there is ahead. How much more do you suppose unbelievers are facing the future with great consternation and anxiety. This is the time to show them that your anchor holds during times of uncertainty. This is the time to show them your confidence in the One who rules the future.

This is the time, then, to go after the ark – to see Christ and pursue Christ. May it be our motto for the new year – for a year that begins with great challenges due to uncertainties about many things. *When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD you God...go after it.* May we hear such a word spoken to our souls by God Himself.