

Crossing the Jordan: Joshua 3

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

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Last Sunday we studied the fascinating narrative of Joshua 2—the story of the spies going into Jericho . . . Rahab the prostitute hiding them on her roof from the king’s men . . . the spies escaping from Jericho . . . And then, as we’re told in chapter 6, Rahab’s rescue from the destruction which God brought upon that city. These were amazing events that happened around 3,500 years ago. And, as we learned, that story also has much relevance for our lives today. As Christians, we are in a similar scenario as Rahab the prostitute. We have been immoral. We have done things contrary to God’s commands. But we now fear and love the Lord. We are aware of His great power and His authority over all the earth. We now identify ourselves with Him, not with the world. We are committed to Him, committed to following Him.

And like Rahab as she waited for the Israelites to return and defeat her city (but spare her and her family), we live presently in the time between the promise and the fulfillment. We’ve been promised deliverance, but that deliverance has not yet come. God’s just judgment is coming upon our city, upon our world. But we have confidence that when that judgment comes, we will be spared. All those who are trusting in the Lord, identifying with Him, following Him, will be delivered from judgment. Rather than judgment, we will receive a warm welcome into the Lord’s presence, to be with Him and His people forever.

What we’ve seen so far in the book of Joshua is the commissioning of Joshua in the first part of chapter 1. Moses is dead, and the Lord commissions Joshua to assume that leadership role. In the second half of chapter 1 Joshua begins to exercise that leadership by giving instructions to the officers of Israel and those officers voice their eagerness to follow. Chapter 2 is the account of Rahab and the spies.

And that brings us now to chapters 3-5, which tell the story of Israel crossing the Jordan and the things that happened immediately on the other side right before going on to Jericho. In these 3 chapters the narrative slows down considerably. We’re told about the crossing of the Jordan in great detail. This was a tremendously significant event.

It may be the story of Jericho’s walls falling down that is most prominent in our minds when we think about Israel entering

the Promised Land. And, indeed, that was an amazing event too. But the crossing of the Jordan is what really marks their entrance into the Promised Land. They haven't defeated Jericho yet, but they are crossing into the Land. It's as good as theirs, because the Lord is giving it to them.

So we're going to take our time considering this piece of the story. The book of Joshua puts a special emphasis on this event, and I don't want to miss that emphasis. My plan is to study chapter 3 today, chapter 4 next week, and then chapter 5 the week after that.

In chapter 3 today I want to focus on some very encouraging truths about our God that were true for the Israelites as they crossed the Jordan River and are true for us today. First, God is present with His people. Second, God leads His people. And finally, God acts powerfully on behalf of His people. All of these points should be very encouraging to us, whatever your situation may be in life right now, whatever trials or temptations or triumphs are before you. God is with us. He is leading us. And He is acting with power on our behalf.

God Is Present with His People

Do you ever feel lonely? Do you sometimes think that nobody is on your side, nobody understands you, nobody cares? One of the wonderful truths that we can cling to as Christians is that God is always with us. He's never going to desert us. Remember what He said to Joshua in chapter 1:9? "Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." That's a promise you and I can cling to as well. Jesus reiterated that promise to His disciples, to all of us who are trusting Him and following Him. He said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In the account of Israel crossing the Jordan, there is a very tangible representation of the Lord's presence with them. The ark of the covenant was a vivid reminder to them that the Lord's presence was in their midst. This is the first mention of the ark of the covenant in the book of Joshua, and it's a really important part of the story.

I want to spend some time explaining this piece of furniture that the Israelites carried around with them, that was much more than a piece of furniture. It was there in the most holy place of the tabernacle and then the temple. But then it disappears from the story, which is something that has intrigued many throughout history. There are some Ethiopian Christians who believe that a

priest during the time of Solomon brought the ark to Ethiopia, and that it is still there today.¹ This kind of intrigue even inspired a movie that you may remember from years ago (decades ago) – *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with Harrison Ford.

There are many interesting things about this ark. What I want to focus on is what it communicates to us about God's presence with His people.

We first read about the ark of the covenant in Exodus 25. This is where the Lord gives Moses the instructions for building the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a tent that the Israelites could transport with them as they travelled through the wilderness.

There were two rooms—the holy place and the most holy place. In the outer, larger room—the holy place—was the table of showbread, the golden lampstand, and the altar of incense. Then there was the veil which separated the holy place from the most holy place. And inside the veil, within the most holy place, was the ark of the covenant.

The ark was not extremely large. It was a box about 3 feet 9 inches long and about 2 feet 3 inches wide and high. It was covered in gold inside and out. It had rings on the sides with poles that went through those rings so that the priests could carry it. And on top was the mercy seat, which had two golden cherubim (angelic creatures) facing one another, their wings overshadowing the mercy seat. It was from that place that the Lord would speak to Moses—from above the mercy seat, between the two cherubim.

The two tablets of the law that the Lord gave to Moses were kept inside of the ark. There was also a golden urn inside holding some manna, and Aaron's staff that had budded.

The ark was not a thing to take lightly or to treat recklessly. It was a representation of God's presence with His people, and God is not to be taken lightly. God is holy, and the ark was a symbol of that. There were actually individuals whom the Lord killed because they did not respect the ark the way He had commanded them to.

When we think of the ark of the covenant we think of God's holiness. And it causes us to feel the awkwardness, indeed, the intense strain, of a holy God dwelling in the midst of an unholy people. Inside the ark was the 10 commandments, which the

¹ Robert Hubbard, *The NIV Application Commentary: Joshua*, page 163. He references Hancock, *The Sign and the Seal*.

people had broken. God was very aware, and very saddened, by their disobedience.

But then we think of the mercy seat there on the top of the ark. Here is where we find hope. God's holiness would push all of us out of His presence. But because of the blood of the sacrifice, sprinkled on the mercy seat, there is hope, there is mercy. (You can read in Leviticus 16 some of the instructions to the priests about how this was to be done). Those sacrifices, that blood, points forward to the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross, where His blood was shed for us. It's His blood that covers over our disobedience, our un-holiness, and reconciles us to a holy God.

It's providential that the ark disappeared, because it would just be a distraction. Jesus Christ is the One we look to now. He is the One who came to earth and fully manifested God's presence among us. He is Immanuel, God with us. And do you remember what happened when Jesus died on the cross? The veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom—the veil that separated the holy place from the most holy place—indicating that Jesus has made a way for sinners like you and me to enter the very presence of Almighty God.

So as we consider this scene of the Israelites preparing to cross the Jordan, with the Levitical priests carrying the ark of the covenant, we should think of the astounding miracle of holy God dwelling in the very midst of His unholy people.

God Leads His People

The next thing to consider is that God leads His people. The ark represents God's presence, and it's the ark that leads the way, representing God's leadership of His people. God is leading them into the Promised Land. I have 3 sub-points under this heading.

God Goes Before His People

Verse 4. 2,000 cubits would be about 1,000 yards. This is over a half mile. Why such a distance? Well, as we were just thinking about the holiness of God, there was to be a reverent fear and distance from the ark. I'm sure that was part of the reason. But the reason that's given right here in the verse is so that the people would know where they should go.

You have to remember the amount of people we're talking about here. Numbers 26 gives the census that was taken of the new generation—those who would be going into the Promised

Land. The men numbered 601,730. Including women and children, the total population would have been over 2 million.

So in order for the ark to give direction to that mass of people, it had to be quite a ways out in front. The people could lift their eyes and see the exact direction the Lord was leading them.

We may face decisions in life sometimes when we think, “I wish there was an ark of the covenant out in front of me that would guide me in the exact direction I should go.” But then if we stop and contemplate what we have been given, we realize that we have something even clearer than that. For we have the entirety of God’s revealed Word in the Scriptures (Old Testament and New Testament). And in that Word we have the clear example of Jesus’ life and teaching. We must fix our eyes on Him.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1–2, ESV)

We may not have an audible instruction from the Lord on whether to take this job or that job, whether to live in this city or that city, whether to attend this school or that school, but what we do have is so much more valuable. Because as we follow the example and instruction of Jesus Christ we will, by His grace, become individuals who make wise decisions that honor Him and benefit us and others.

Be grateful today that the Lord goes before us.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15, ESV)

We have a leader, a Savior, who has walked this path before us. He’s not asking us to go anywhere He hasn’t already gone or to face any trial or temptation He hasn’t already endured.

God’s People Are to Be Prepared

Verse 5. Consecrating themselves would have involved special washings. It would mean foregoing certain foods and also abstinence from sex. It was a way of saying, This is not life as usual. This is a unique time, a special time. After all, the Lord is going to do wonders among us! This is worth setting ourselves

apart, setting this time apart, to savor what the Lord is doing among us and to prepare ourselves for what is on the horizon.

What might this look like for us? What's on your horizon? Or maybe it's no longer on the horizon, but it's here. What are the wonders God is working in your life, which may have elements of excitement as well as terror.

If you think about it, that's where the Israelites were. We may think back on the story and assume it would have been quite thrilling to be there ready to cross the Jordan. But the walls of Jericho were still standing. It was an intimidating position to be in. The raging waters of the Jordan River in front of you, and then the high, fortified walls of Jericho. That would be quite a scary place to be.

And maybe you can identify with that. Maybe you sense a clear call from God to pursue a certain path, and yet the obstacles loom large right in front of you. What are you to do?

Consecrate yourself. Set yourself apart. Dedicate yourself to the Lord. Figure out some ways to separate yourself from "life as normal" so that you can spend time in the presence of the Lord. Carve out some time in your schedule for silence and solitude, for meditating on God's Word and praying to Him. Maybe this would include fasting. Fasting from food, or fasting from media.

And maybe you would put some of this down in writing as well, writing out some of your prayers to God. Tell Him in no uncertain terms that you intend to follow Him wholeheartedly, however risky it may seem. Ask Him for clear direction and for the courage to step out and do what He calls you to do.

God's People Are to Follow in Faith

If you remember back to Numbers 13 when Moses sent the 12 spies into the land, and they spent 40 days searching out the land. But then they came back and 10 of the spies gave a very negative, pessimistic report that showed their unbelief in God. The Lord was leading them into the Promised Land, but the people would not follow. The Lord brought judgment upon those 10 spies as a result.

So then the people changed their minds and decided that they would go up and try to invade the land. But at that point the Lord was not leading them. The Lord was not with them, and Moses warned them not to attempt this, taking matters into their own hands, seeking to do this in their own strength. But they went

anyway. And sure enough, they were soundly defeated. You can read of those events in Numbers 13-14.

What do we learn from this? We learn that we must follow the Lord in faith. When He says go, we go. But when He doesn't say go, we don't try to force something to happen without His blessing upon it.

Fortunately, the negative example of Numbers 13-14 finds a contrast in the attitude of the Israelites in Joshua 3. Here they are waiting for the Lord's lead and then following Him just as they had been instructed.

On Thursday morning I read a great sermon by Charles Spurgeon that was based specifically on one verse from this chapter. In fact, one short statement from this passage. In verse 4 is the instruction to follow the ark at a distance of 1,000 yards. They need to be able to know where to go. And then at the very end of the verse a further explanation is given, "for you have not passed this way before." That's the statement Spurgeon expounded. He talks about various situations (a new opportunity or trial, or it might be both an opportunity and a trial), something that involves a significant change in our lives, and how we are to follow the Lord in such circumstances.

I'll share with you two of the specific exhortations Spurgeon gives. The first is, "Do not hurry."

He says, "if you are now about to enter into a great trouble, do not hurry, make no rash haste. We often, when we are afraid of a thing, dash into it like a moth dazzled by the candle's flame. We become so disturbed in our minds that we do not act wisely and prudently, but fall into that haste which brings no good speed. The children of Israel did not rush pell mell to Jordan to swim across, but they waited while the priests went on before, and tarried till the ark stood still in the midst of Jordan. Everything was done deliberately. Ask grace to do the same. Be calm. If the grace of God does not make us calm in the time of peril and suffering, we have some reason to question whether it is healthily operating upon our spirits at all."²

In other words, we should expect that God is going to give us some sense of peace about moving forward. So we should be patient for a clear plan and a sense of peace to emerge.

² Spurgeon, C. H. (1872). *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 18, p. 357). London: Passmore & Alabaster.

But then the thing Spurgeon says right after that is, “Do not hesitate.”

“But next, while you do not hurry, do not hesitate. Not one man of all the tribes said, “I must wait and see others cross, and know whether the road really is open.” At the moment the trumpets sounded the advance they all went on, asking no questions. A brave man that first priest must have been who went right up to the brink of Jordan and put down his foot. It must have been a noble sight to see the water suddenly roll right away in curling waves till it made a great wall of sparkling crystal up towards the right. He was a brave man who stepped there first and passed along the novel way which God had newly fashioned. His was the first foot which had trodden the bottom of that ancient river, the river Jordan. Be brave, also, my dear brother, and go straight on, though it were a river of fire instead of water. If Jehovah bids you the way is right, hesitate not.”³

Now, I’m sure those statements will still leave you with some questions if there’s a particular decision in front of you. These statements do not give us a simple formula for the weighty decisions of life, nor are they intended to. But as we pray and meditate on Scripture and seek godly counsel, we can trust that God will make His will clear to us in His timing. So we can be content to wait upon His leading while we’re also prepared to jump up and go when the door clearly opens, when the waters open up so that we can walk through on dry ground.

God Acts Powerfully on Behalf of His People

Finally, let’s consider the miracle itself as we see that God acts powerfully on behalf of His people. This is, truly, a remarkable miracle. It is clearly reminiscent of the crossing of the Red Sea. Only Joshua and Caleb experienced both of those miracles. The rest of the people who crossed through the Red Sea had died in the wilderness. Even Moses had died recently on Mt. Nebo. So Joshua and Caleb had been part of something like this 40 years prior. But the rest of the Israelites at this point had only heard the stories.

The Jordan River is not a very big river throughout most of the year. It’s normally 90-100 feet wide and 3-10 feet deep. But during the spring time it gets much wider and deeper, as verse 15 tells us. Melting snow and spring rains contribute to this.

³ Spurgeon, C. H. (1872). *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 18, p. 357). London: Passmore & Alabaster.

What the Israelites encountered was a formidable obstacle. Certainly something they would not have been able to overcome apart from a miracle.

An interesting piece of trivia is that there are recorded 3 times in history when the Jordan River was stopped as a result of natural causes. Most recently in 1927 there was an earthquake that caused a mudslide down into the Jordan which stopped the river from flowing for 21 hours. Some people would use such evidence to discount the supernatural aspect of what we're reading about here in Joshua 3.

But even if God did use an earthquake to stop the Jordan (which He's allowed to do), there are so many pieces of this event which are inexplicable apart from divine intervention. The timing of it is miraculous. Just as the priests put their feet in the river, it stops. And just as they step out of the river, it begins flowing again (see 4:18). We also have to be amazed when we read in verse 17 of chapter 3 that the Israelites walked across on dry ground. It wasn't muddy sludge that they had to wade through to get across. They walked on dry ground. However God did this, it was nothing short of an amazing miracle.

We learn in verse 16 that the river rose up in a heap near a city called Adam, which was beside Zerethan. Now, the Jordan River begins north of the Sea of Galilee and runs south into the Sea of Galilee and then out of the Sea of Galilee, winding its way south all the way to the Dead Sea. The city of Adam is thought to have been near the confluence of the Jabbok River and the Jordan. So the water was stopped as far north as the Jabbock, making the river bed empty all the way down to the Dead Sea (about 18 miles).

As I mentioned before, there were over 2 million Israelites who crossed the Jordan. This would be like gathering everyone in the Pittsburgh metro area, throughout Southwestern PA, right here in the West End / Elliott neighborhoods (and spilling over into the surrounding neighborhoods), and then all of us crossing the Ohio River over toward Heinz Field. Not that Heinz Field is the Promised Land. I'm just trying to give you an idea of the magnitude of this event. Over 2 million people. Those priests would have been standing there for quite a while! This wasn't something that happened in 30 minutes. It would have been hours as thousands and hundreds of thousands of folks crossed over.

I imagine they spread out for some distance north and south as they all made their way across that dry river bed. But even without the water, and even with the ground being dry, I think it still would have been a laborious trip. The banks of the river

would be somewhat steep, so it would take some time and some work to go down and back up.

But I can picture the amazement on the faces of every family as they approached that dry river bed. As they saw with their very eyes the miracle that had been promised. And then as they stepped foot into the land that had been promised. It was a very memorable day, indeed.

The Living God

I want to close by reading verses 10-13 again and highlighting the phrases “the living God” and “the Lord of all the earth.” Read verses

Brothers and sisters, let it be known among us today that the God who parts the Red Sea, who is the same God who stopped the waters of the Jordan River, is the One true and living God. Indeed, He is the Lord of all the earth. He is not just the God of Israel. He is not just the God of one particular church or one particular ethnicity. He is not a tribal deity. He is the sovereign Lord over all the earth. He is the One true God, the only God who can save us completely and eternally from our sin.

He is the God who is present with His people, the God who leads His people, and who acts powerfully on behalf of His people.