

Joshua 3:14:-24

Crossing and Commemoration

Review and Introduction

Well, I trust you are ready, ready to cross the Jordan River that is. For that is where we find ourselves today as we continue our study of the book of Joshua. For a quick review, Chapter 1 set the stage from the perspective of the Israelites. Their new leader, Joshua, had begun to fill the very large sandals of Moses, and he was doing well. He was prepared to be strong and courageous, and to lead the Israelites in obedience to the laws of God despite the temptations of the wicked pagans that lay ahead.

In chapter 2, we learned that those in Canaan, particularly Jericho, had heard of the work of the Lord in bringing His people out of Egypt, across the desert, and through hostile territory. They had heard of the victories of the Israelites over Sihon and Og, two notorious Amorite kings. Their hearts had melted, as Scripture puts it, and they were afraid. God was on display, and they were, quite naturally for pagans, terrified.

But one of the inhabitants of Jericho, a woman of doubtful repute named Rahab, took it upon herself to change her allegiance, to confess her faith in the God of Israel, and to make a bargain with two spies whom Joshua had sent on ahead to reconnoiter the land. She would assist them if, in turn, they promised that she and her family would be spared during the upcoming slaughter. Thus she survived, joined the people of Israel, and eventually became an ancestor of the Messiah.

So now we are ready. As we go through our extended narrative today, one of crossing and commemoration, keep in mind that there is a narrative technique employed by the writer. As with chapter 2, not all of the action is sequential. There is a back and forth, there is a repetition of certain events with added details. This is intended to build suspense, emphasizes the importance of obedience to the commands of the Lord, and keeps the focus on the miraculous work of God.

Preparations for the Crossing

The Israelites began by simply moving closer to the Jordan River, "all the sons of Israel set out from Shittim and came to Jordan, and they spent the night there before they crossed" (3:1). This was a smart strategic move, to save time on the day of the crossing. At that time, the people of Israel saw a rushing river, swollen with spring rains in front of them. It was one thing for a few spies to make their way across, but here we are talking about a nation of millions, with all their possessions had to cross.



We see that the officers of the people, first mentioned in 1:10, then went through the camp a second time giving instructions for the manner of the crossing.

³When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God with the Levitical priests carrying it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. ⁴However, there shall be a distance between you and it of about two thousand cubits by measurement. Do not come near it, so that you may know the way by which you shall go, for you have not passed this way before" (3:3-4).

The ark was the most significant religious symbol of the people of Israel at this time. Its construction had been specifically ordered by the Lord (Exodus 25), and it contained three symbols of Israel's relationship with God (the tablet of the commandments, Aaron's rod, and a jar of manna). Perhaps most importantly, it was the place where God met with Moses and gave him instructions. To the Israelites, the ark meant the very presence of the Lord.

The preeminence of the ark in this account reminds us that the crossing of the Jordan, indeed the entire series of events beginning with the exodus, was a spiritual doing. Joshua does not send his Army Corps of Engineers to assess the best way to cross the river. He does not organize his army for an invasion. Instead, he sends the priests who carried the ark of the covenant, the visible representation of God's presence.

The people are commanded to stand back. I can think of three reasons for this. First, this was a demonstration of reverence for the presence of the Lord, as represented by the ark. Recall that the people had been commanded to stand back at Mount Sinai as well. Second, in this instance, God required that they keep some 1,000 yards behind the ark. This distance gave the people the opportunity to see the great miracle the Lord was about to perform. Remember that because of the

geography of the Jordan River Valley, this meant that most people would be at a slightly higher elevation than the river itself, so they would have a clear view of the miracle. Finally, there was the spiritual lesson to be learned. The ark of the covenant was to lead the way. Israel would accomplish this impossible task only as they set their eyes upon God's presence and followed after Him.

Having arrived at the Jordan River, Joshua then commanded the people to consecrate themselves. This was also done at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:5-10), and it was intended to remind the Israelites that holiness was essential in their relationship with God. Since the people were at the river, the water required for the cleaning of clothes and ritual cleansing was readily available. No doubt that was a factor as well in the move from Shittim. But the greater point being made is that, as the people prepared to cross the Jordan and engage in the conquest of the land of promise, a spiritual battle requires that the people have a spiritual preparation.

With the ritual consecrations completed, Joshua then commanded the priests to "take up the ark of the covenant and cross over ahead of the people" (3:6). Notice that there is still no indication of how the people will get across the river. No details are yet given to the crowds. They are simply to trust Joshua. Nevertheless, we can assume that God told Joshua to do this, and that he wasn't working based upon foolish presumption. Here is, perhaps, the first example of Joshua obeying the commands of "being strong and courageous" in obedience to the Word of God.

Scripture then records that God then spoke to Joshua, explaining further details about the crossing.

⁷"This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they will know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you. ⁸So you shall command the priests who are carrying the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan'" (3:7-8).

The word exalt is the same used for Abraham in Genesis 12:2. It is a word often used with those leaders of the people of Israel whom God chose specifically to bless. We can appreciate the blending of actions here. As Joshua takes this step of faith, God encourages him. Let's pause and reflect that the same is still true of us today. As we obey the Lord, God encourages us. As we work out our faith, God works in us to bring great, sanctifying change about. It is that marvelous truth of which Paul reminded those in the Philippian church.

¹²So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 3:12-13).

Joshua then addressed the people.

"⁹Then Joshua said to the sons of Israel, 'Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God.' ¹⁰And Joshua said, 'By this you will know that the living God is among you, and that He will assuredly drive out from you the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Hivite, the Perizzite, the Girgashite, the Amorite, and the Jebusite. ¹¹Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over ahead of you into the Jordan. ¹²Now then, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man for each tribe. ¹³And it will come about when the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan will be cut off, that is, the waters which are flowing down from above; and they will stand in one heap'" (3:9-13).

After Joshua had obeyed the previous guidance, based on faith and his understanding of God's word, then God gave him more specific instructions, though they must have seemed curious, at least. Nevertheless, Joshua obeys, and he obeys fully and precisely. In this brief speech, first, Joshua issues a call to listen to divine authority. Second, he gives a promise of God's presence. And, finally, he announces that God will dispossess the inhabitants of Canaan.

Not to get lost in historical detail, but in case you are curious, there are twelve different nations, or peoples, mentioned in Scripture as occupying the land of Canaan at the time of the conquest. When any list of those nations is given, these seven are most frequently present, so they must have been the most significant. We can summarize them briefly.

The Canaanite was a generic term, but also specifically referred to those peoples living near the Jordan River. The Hittites were those who dwelt in the hill country of Judah near Hebron. The Hivites are less well-known, but likely inhabited the hills of what is today Lebanon. The Perizzites lived in the forested areas of central Canaan in the highlands of Samaria. The Girgashites were known to inhabit the northern parts of Canaan. The Amorites, like the Canaanites, also can be a generic term, but those referred to here lived in the central hill country of Canaan, as well as east of the Jordan River (think of Sihon and Og). The Jebusites were the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Jerusalem.

I would also focus on Joshua's statement that "by this you shall know that the living God is among you" (3:10). Clearly, Joshua understands that this is to be a work of the Lord. This is to display His glory to both the Israelites and the peoples of Canaan. The great miracle here announced, is to be entirely the work of the Lord. As it was with Joshua, so it is with us today. Every great work in our

lives, even every small blessing, is the work of our gracious Heavenly Father. And by them we, too, can know that the living God is among us.

The Miracle Performed

The miracle of the crossing is related for us in verses 14-17, with part of verse 15 serving as a parenthesis to heighten the suspense.

"¹⁴So when the people set out from their tents to cross the Jordan, with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵and when those who were carrying the ark came up to the Jordan and the feet of the priests carrying the ark stepped down into the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks all the days of harvest), ¹⁶then the waters which were flowing down from above stood and rose up in one heap, a great distance away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan; and those which were flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. So the people crossed opposite Jericho. ¹⁷And the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan while all Israel crossed on dry ground, until all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan" (3:14-17).



Let's recall our geography a bit. The Jordan River valley is between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. It varies from 3-14 miles wide. At its center is the flood plain, from 200 yards wide in the dry season to a mile wide during floods. The terrain in that flood plain is dense undergrowth, so making the way is difficult. The river, itself, varied in width at about 100 feet, but this was flood time, so it must have been significantly wider. And during flood time, the depth of the river was 10-12 feet. Also, because of the significant drop in elevation from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, the current was strong.

So the Israelites faced making their way through, perhaps a quarter mile of dense, marshy bushes, to cross a river that was, perhaps the width of half a football field, a river that was ten feet or so deep, and rushing with a current so strong no man could stand upright. This shows the perfection of God's timing. The flooding river enhances the work of God.

The priests began the procession, with the ark of the covenant some 1,000 yards in front of the people. And when the feet of the priests entered the edge of the water, suddenly the water stopped flowing. To the left of the Israelites, as they watched, the water flowing by disappeared into the distance. To their right, there was . . . nothing. Just an empty river bed.

Later the Israelites must have learned that the water ceased to flow downstream at Adam, modern Tell ed-Damiye. This village is located some eighteen miles north of Jericho. Ironically, it was the easiest place to cross the Jordan River in that area, because south of that city, the river became more treacherous.

In some miraculous manner, God stopped the flow of the Jordan River. The priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan. God may have used a natural occurrence (an earthquake has often been suggested), but that is not important. It was the timing of the event that made it a work of God. Also, notice that the people crossed on dry ground. Even with the flow of the river stopped, it was miraculous that the people could cross over on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan. God miraculously dried the riverbed so that they didn't slog through hundreds of yards of marshy mud.

We cannot consider this miracle without reference to the miracle the nation experienced some forty years earlier with the passing through the Red Sea. Then, God brought them out of Egypt's bondage with a miracle and, now He brought them into the Promised Land with a miracle. If you take time to review that first miracle (Exodus 14-15), you will find three elements that are similar to the one under review this morning. First, in both cases there is the specific reference to dry ground. Second, both writes refer to the waters standing on one heap. Finally, in both cases, the miracle serves the dual purpose of glorifying God and validating a chosen leader.

Memorializing the Crossing, Part One

This section, chapter 4, is divided into two parts. The first, from verses 1-14, speaks of the effects of this miracle to those in Israel. The second, from verses 15-24, speaks of the effects of the miracle to other nations. And we will see that the twelve stones are central to the narrative.

The task to memorialize the crossing is a command from the Lord.

"¹The Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, ²'Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, ³and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firmly, and carry them over with you and lay them down in the encampment where you will spend the night'" (4:1-3).

Israel was now on the other side of the Jordan - in the Promised Land. However, simply entering the Promised Land was not all that Israel had to do. They had to conquer it as well. For the Israelites, the land of Promise was first, a battlefield, in fact several battlefields over many years.

It might be expected that, once safely across the Jordan River, Joshua would command the officers of the people to set up camp, and prepare to engage Jericho. But that is not the Lord's plan. God takes His time. He is never in a rush. He knows His perfect plan and He knows not only how, but when events will unfold. So, before Israel goes to war, they are first to pause and commemorate this miracle.

Joshua was to select twelve men, one from each tribe, to go back into the dry Jordan Riverbed and select one stone each, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firm. I expect the stones were to be large, large enough for a grown man to carry but not merely pebbles. Obviously we see the relation to the twelve tribes, emphasizing the unity of the people of Israel. Even those tribes that were to settle east of the Jordan River Valley participated and contributed their stone.

These stones were to be made into a memorial. The purpose of this memorial was so that the people of Israel could teach their children about the great things God had done; so that the work of God would not be forgotten among the generations. So let's be clear that this was not an altar for sacrifice but for remembrance. As Joshua explained, when he gave the command,

"⁶This shall be a sign among you; when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' ⁷then you shall say to them, 'That the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever" (4:6-7).

The purpose was to serve as a sign for future generations of Israel. But we ought also to see that the pagan nations around them would know of this memorial, and it would serve as a reminder to them as well of the power of the Living God.

The people did as Joshua commanded, "So the sons of Israel did exactly as Joshua commanded" (4:8). What the Lord commanded, Joshua spoke. There is a chain of command and obedience. The Lord spoke to Joshua, and Joshua spoke to the people. As Joshua obeyed the commands of the Lord, so the people obeyed the commands of Joshua.

Then, Scripture references a second memorial. "Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day" (4:9). So, Joshua, himself apparently, also set up a pile of memorial stones in the very bed of the river Jordan. It is likely that this memorial could only be seen when the river was very low, during times of drought, for example. No explanation is given for this second memorial, but the writer does indicate that it still remained years later. Perhaps the purpose was simply to remind the Israelites that especially in a time of drought, we need to remember the great things God has done.

Here is where the narrative may seem to lose some of its chronology.

¹⁰For the priests who carried the ark were standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything was completed that the Lord had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. And the people hurried and crossed; ¹¹and when all the people had finished crossing, then the ark of the Lord and the priests crossed in front of the people" (4:10-11).

The crossing takes place during the events of v. 1-9. The priests stood with the ark of the covenant for the entire time it took the nation to cross over. The visible token of the presence of God had to remain in the river through the entire crossing.

And then Scripture reminds us that all the tribes crossed the river. This had been agreed to previously, but the fact that Scripture reinforces it, is evidence that the unity of the nation is still intact.

¹²The sons of Reuben, the sons of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle formation before the sons of Israel, just as Moses had spoken to them; ¹³about forty thousand equipped for war, crossed for battle before the Lord to the desert plains of Jericho" (4:12-13).

Those tribes that were to live east of the Jordan River were still obligated to fight on behalf of the rest of the nation, just as they had promised (Joshua 1:12-16). We also see that there is deliberate

preparation for war, and a specific reference to Jericho, which was located some six miles west of the river. The memorial completed, the conquest was soon to begin.

One certainly must wonder why didn't the inhabitants of Jericho and other Canaanite city-states challenge the crossing? After all, military strategy, even in the ancient world dictated that armies were vulnerable when crossing a river. If you can recall your American history, you know that Washington crossing the Delaware River on Christmas, 1776 to attack the Hessian in Trenton was the exception that proved the rule.

Scripture gives us no insight here, so we must speculate. Some have argued that the quick move from Shittim to the Jordan River and then crossing came before the Canaanites could get ready for battle, though this seems unlikely since the Israelites stayed at Shittim for three days to consecrate themselves. Others have suggested that because the Israelites crossed at an unexpected place, where the river was considered impassible they came upon the Canaanites by surprise, though this seems equally unlikely since it is difficult to surprise people when you are advancing with a population of two million. It seems the best thought is to remember that this is the work of the Lord. Recall that the hearts of those in Jericho, and we can assume surrounding cities had melted. If the Lord can dry up the Jordan River, He can dry up the courage of any who might oppose the crossing.

This section concludes, "on that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life" (4:14). God fulfilled His promise to Joshua (Joshua 3:7), raising him up as a great leader for Israel, even as He had done for Moses. There must have been a sense of reverent fear, holy fear, awe in Joshua as he was confirmed as the new Moses.

Memorializing the Crossing, Part Two

What God had begun, He now brought to completion. The lord commanded Joshua to

¹⁶Command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that they come up from the Jordan. ¹⁷So Joshua commanded the priests, saying, 'Come up from the Jordan.' ¹⁸It came about when the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord had come up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up to the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before" (4:16-18).

The priests came up. The river was behind them. The miracle was completed. The waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before. The manner and timing with

which the Jordan returned to its natural flow show that this event was supernaturally arranged by God. Further proof of the miraculous, and of God's role in the crossing.

Once on the other side of the river, the Israelites made their way to Gilgal where they encamped.

¹⁹Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month and camped at Gilgal, on the eastern edge of Jericho. ²⁰As for those twelve stones which they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set them up at Gilgal. ²¹And he said to the sons of Israel, 'When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, "What are these stones?" ²²Then you shall inform your children, saying, "Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground." ²³For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; ²⁴so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever" (4:19-24).

Here, the memorial of the stones was formally established. Gilgal would serve as the Israelite base of operations for the conquest of the entire Promised Land. Therefore, it was appropriate that the first work at Gilgal was to set up a memorial to God's great works. Gilgal also became influential in Israel's religious life, though we do not know its exact location today, because the word means circle and could refer to any number of fortified camps and settlements in the area. But to give a few examples from Scripture, it became a place of sacrifice (1 Samuel 10:8), it was where Samuel judged (1 Samuel 7:16), and it was where Saul was made king (1 Samuel 11:14-15). Eventually, however, like much of Israel, it became apostate and was judged both by Hosea (Hosea 9:15) and Amos (Amos 4:4).

We ought also to point out the significance of the detail of the particular time of year that these events occurred. It was the tenth day of the first month. This month is Nisan, or Abib, which was sometime between March and April. But its significance lies less in the calendar than in its history.

¹Now the Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ²"This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year for you. ³Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, "On the tenth of this month they are, each one, to take a lamb for themselves, according to the fathers' households, a lamb for each household"" (Exodus 12:1-3).

In other words this was the Passover. This was the time when the Israelites specifically remembered their escape from slavery in Egypt. Now, it would also be the time when they would recall the crossing of the Jordan.

Joshua had the final words at the dedication of the memorial, and they are worth closing with.

"²³For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; ²⁴so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever" (4:23-24).

Joshua's speech at the end is significant. It is an affirmation that all of this was the work of the Lord, and it is an affirmation that the Lord is the one true God. It speaks of the purpose of God's work, which was to bring glory to Himself. The peoples of Canaan would recognize the mighty hand of the Lord, but the Israelites needed to remember to be strong and courageous in obedience as well.

Takeaways

Certain elements of this narrative stand out to me, so I will close with this. To begin, it is clear that the focus throughout is that this is the work of God. Ultimately, the crossing of the Jordan was not about getting across the river but demonstrating the power and presence of the Lord.

Also, I think we should recognize the significance of the waters of the Jordan River flowing again. After all, once on the other side, there was no going back. The people of Israel were in hostile territory and, though they were great in number, they were not warriors and they had neither cities nor sophisticated armaments. They would need to trust the Lord.

Finally, this narrative reminds me that perhaps the greatest enemy of faith is not sin, but forgetfulness. We are all so very blessed. So very blessed that we can take these blessings for granted. I would encourage you to take some time, and make a list of your own stones. That is, those significant events that you, personally, can point to as times when God revealed His power, His majesty, and His grace in your life. It will be time well spent.