

“All Israel Was Passing Over on Dry Ground ”

The seventy-third in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 3:1-17; Matthew 3:13-17

In the history of every nation, there are those defining moments which give that nation its character and which determine the course of its future. Israel’s crossing of the Jordan River is certainly one such event. From the days of Abraham—some four hundred years earlier—the promise of dwelling in the land of Canaan had been the dream of every Israelite since. Having been delivered from their bondage in Egypt, the people of God have spent the last forty years in the wilderness, waiting for this glorious day to come. In terms of the course of redemptive history, Israel’s crossing over the Jordan River into the land of Canaan is on a par with the crossing of the Red Sea. Crossing the river into Canaan changes everything. In this event, we see God working mighty wonders, fulfilling his covenant promises, and setting the future course for his people. Israel will now enter Canaan as a great nation, about to inherit that land God had given them. And all the inhabitants of Canaan are terrified, because they know that Israel’s God is the LORD and that he will give his people the land he has promised them.

As we continue our series on the Book of Joshua—part of our larger series “I Will be Your God and You Will be My People”—we now come to Joshua chapters 3-4, which describe a monumental event in Israel’s history, that day when God’s people cross the Jordan River and enter the land of promise. Because of the importance of this day in Israel’s history, Joshua covers this material in substantial detail. In chapter 3, Joshua describes the events associated with the preparation for the crossing (the topic for this sermon). And then in chapter 4, Joshua recounts the building of a memorial to commemorate the crossing and the entrance into the promised land (the subject of our sermon next time).

As we have seen, the people of Israel are camped at Shittim on the plains of Moab eagerly expecting the news which they have waited so long to hear. In chapter 1, Joshua issued the command for the people to spend three days in preparation for crossing the river. The officers then went through the camp and spread the word among the people. There can be no doubt that everyone was excited and filled with anticipation. Joshua also used this three days to gather intelligence upon the land around Jericho as well as the morale of its inhabitants. As we saw in chapter two, Joshua sent two spies into Jericho to gather this important information. Aided by Rahab—a Canaanite prostitute who lived in the city and who hid the two spies from her own king, who had discovered that the two spies were in the city—the spies had reported back to Joshua that the people of Jericho were terrified of YHWH and that they were well aware of YHWH’s promise to give Israel the land of Canaan. Everything was falling into place just as God had promised. Israel was ready to move, and the Canaanites will melt away before the Israelite advance.

Since the time had finally come for the nation of Israel to cross the river and enter the land, Joshua issues instructions in verses 1-6 to the people of Israel regarding the manner of crossing.

After Israel had defeated the two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, they camped near Shittim (which means Acacia grove).¹ Having spent three days in preparation, the people were ready to march. According to verse 1, “*then Joshua rose early in the morning and they set out from Shittim. And they came to the*

¹ Howard, Joshua, 119.

Jordan, he and all the people of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over.” From a military and logistics point of view, it made a great deal of sense for Israel to move as close to the river as possible so that little time would be required when undertaking the actual crossing of the river (ESV—passing over).

With the preparation complete, Joshua gave the command for the officers to once again go throughout the camp and give the people their final instructions. *“At the end of three days the officers went through the camp and commanded the people, ‘As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it. Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits in length. Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.’”*

The instructions regarding the ark are in full accord with the instructions given earlier in Numbers 1-2, 10. The ark of the covenant was to go out in front of the people, because this was God’s means of leading his people to a place of safety and rest. The people were quite familiar with this procedure, as the ark was always in the front when the people marched. God led the way and the people followed. In this case, following the ark will be especially important, because God will lead them to that exact point along the Jordan River where they will cross, and he will do so in such a way as to protect the people from possible attack from the Canaanites, who were certainly aware that the Israelites were marching.

The ark of the covenant symbolized the presence of YHWH with his people. In the ark were the two tables of the law, Aaron, the high priest’s staff, and a jar of manna. It fell to the priests from the tribe of Levi to carry the ark using poles so that no human hand touched it.² Because the ark symbolized God’s presence, it needed to be carried 2000 cubits in front of the column—a distance of about a thousand yards.³ Just as the people of God nor their animals were not allowed to approach Mount Sinai lest they be killed—because YHWH was present there—now they are commanded to keep their distance from the ark. We should also notice that here in Joshua 3:6, it is called “the ark of the covenant,” and in verse 11, “the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth.” This is because the ark not only symbolized God’s presence with his people, but the ark is very closely associated with the covenant God had made with Israel at Mount Sinai. The symbolic presence of God with his people as they marched, is one of the benefits of a suzerainty-treaty (such as the Sinaitic covenant), wherein the great king (YHWH), promises to protect his people from their enemies. The presence of the ark at the front of the column meant that to mess with Israel was to mess with YHWH.

Once the officers got the people ready to march, Joshua had another important command for the people in verse 5. *“Then Joshua said to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.’”* This command echoes that which God gave Moses on Mount Sinai, in which Moses was to consecrate the people of Israel. According to the terms spelled out in Exodus 19:10-15, the people were to wash their clothes and abstain from sexual relations. This was because God had called the people of Israel to be his own, and so the people of Israel were to be consecrated to him according to the instructions given throughout the Book of Leviticus, of which this command was a reflection. The people of Israel had not undergone such consecration since the days when they camped at Mount Sinai. Most of those alive then, were now dead. These acts of consecration are to be performed by a new

² Howard, Joshua, 120.

³ Hess, Joshua, 99.

generation of Israelites before the people cross the river, just as they did so before God gave the law.⁴

In this symbolic act of consecration, we see the blessing-curse principle in action. As God's people are faithful to the terms of the covenant (set apart for YHWH's purposes), God will work wonders among them, a term which essentially means "miracles" and harkens us back to the wonders God performed in Egypt and in the crossing of the Red Sea. These wonders will demonstrate God's faithfulness to his people and instill fear in the hearts of the Canaanites. Rahab recounted how the knowledge of these things was both common among the Canaanites and instrumental in her own faith in YHWH—"I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Joshua 2:9-11). Everyone in Canaan knew what God had done for Israel. Now they will see it for themselves.

Having addressed the people, in verses 6-13, Joshua now gives final commands to the priests who will carry the ark and set the stage for the miracle to follow.

According to verse 6, "*and Joshua said to the priests, 'Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on before the people.' So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.*" Based upon these instructions, it is becoming clear that the ark of the covenant will be the symbolic means through which the power of God will be manifest, as the people at long last enter the land promised to them. Just as the LORD directed Moses at key moments in redemptive history, he now directs Joshua, revealing to him detailed instructions for the crossing of the river.

In verses 7-8, "*The LORD said to Joshua, 'Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. And as for you, command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'*" Even though Joshua is not directly involved in the miracle, the point of the miracle is clear—everyone in Israel will know that God is with Joshua, and that Joshua is God's chosen leader of his people just as Moses had been. This confirmation was vital as the people prepared to enter the land. In their weakness they need to know that YHWH is with Joshua and that their leader's strength and courage flow directly from YHWH's promise.

As YHWH has revealed his purpose to Joshua, so now Joshua will reveal this purpose to the people. "*And Joshua said to the people of Israel, 'Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God.' And Joshua said, 'Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. Now therefore take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man. And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.'*" Just as Israel miraculously crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, so now they are about to cross over the Jordan River on dry ground.

⁴ Howard, Joshua, 122.

Through the mediation of Joshua, God summons his people to hear his word. He then reaffirms his promise to be among his people and to deliver them from all their enemies. Israel's God is the true and living God who speaks to his people and then acts on their behalf. This differentiates YHWH from all the false gods of the Canaanites, who are nothing but wood and stone and the figment of the sinful human imagination. More importantly, God is promising his people that he will do for them what they cannot do for themselves—he drive out the fierce peoples who live in Canaan. God has promised. God will fulfill his word. And the Canaanites will melt away before the people of Israel.

At this point, we are given a list of those tribes who were living in Canaan. Remember, that according to Rahab's testimony about the Canaanites, the people of Jericho knew of God's awesome power and his covenant promise to Israel. We can assume that this was the case for all of these various tribes and peoples. They had heard about what YHWH had done for his people. They knew that this land was promised to Israel. This means that the various tribes mentioned here were nothing but squatters and interlopers in the land of promise. God holds the title and is about to evict all of them.

We know from archeological evidence that these people were pagans and most worshiped Baal, who, the Canaanites believed was responsible for both fertility and weather. The Canaanites also worshiped the goddess Asherah—whose name will surface later on. There were temples and altars (“high places”) devoted to these “gods” located throughout much of Canaan. Religious practices included animal sacrifice and various fertility rites. Given the fact that YHWH is a jealous God and his people must worship and serve him only, this explains why, in part, Israel must be consecrated to YHWH before they enter into the land. The godless and pagan behavior of the Canaanites—who lived in a land where people knew that YHWH was the true and living God, but served their own idols anyway—will help to explain, why YHWH will command such horrific judgment to befall them.

The term “Canaanites” can loosely refer to all the peoples living in the region of Canaan, but as it does here, it can also refer to those people living just to the west of the Jordan River in the area around Jericho and the Dead Sea. This was the area which Israel would occupy once they cross the river. The Hittites were the most feared people of the period and would have lived in the hill country of Judea (near Hebron, Bersheeba and Jerusalem). These would be peoples connected to the great Hittite empire to the north, but who lived outside the bounds of Hittite territory. The Hivites, Perizzites and Girgashites are obscure tribes, unknown outside the Bible. The Hivites probably lived in what is now Lebanon, the Perizzites in the forested area of Palestine, while nothing more is known of the Girgashites. The Amorites were the people living to the East of the Jordan, while the Jebusites lived near what is now Jerusalem.⁵ In any case, all of these people will be driven from the land.

Joshua also made it clear that the sign for the people to march was when the ark of the covenant was positioned near the water's edge. At that moment, the LORD of all the earth will demonstrate his great power and his covenant faithfulness as the waters of the Jordan will be miraculously parted, just as God had parted the Red Sea when his people left Egypt. The main idea here is that God is sovereign over all things—including the Canaanites, who even begrudgingly are forced to acknowledge this fact, although they refuse to worship him, preferring their pagan deities.⁶ According to Joshua, one man from each of the twelve tribes was to cross over with the priests. These are the men who will build a memorial to the

⁵ Howard, Joshua, 127.

⁶ Hess, Joshua, 102.

Lord (as described in chapter 4, and our subject for next time).

With everything in place, the time has come for the people to cross over into Canaan.

This short section (verses 14-17) is the climax of the entire account of chapters 3-4, the report God's miraculous provision for his people to cross over and enter the land. As we read in verses 14-16, *"So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho."*

Just as God had promised, as soon as the feet of the priests carrying the ark of the covenant touched the waters of the Jordan, the water instantly stopped flowing south toward the Dead Sea and piled up in a heap upriver, while the people passed through on dry ground. What made this miracle especially remarkable is that when God stopped the water from flowing so that the people could walk through on dry ground, the Jordan was at flood stage (meaning it must be in the late spring when the water is deepest). Just as they had crossed through the Red Sea forty years before, they cross over the river on dry ground. You can just imagine what the people were thinking and how excited they were.

As for the exact location of the crossing, many scholars believe that Adam is a site in the Jericho Valley about eighteen miles to the north of Jericho. To the south of Adam, the Jordan meanders on its way into the Dead Sea and ordinarily crossing there would have been difficult because there would be marshes and mud.⁷ But it is here, south of Adam, that the Israelites crossed the river directly opposite the city of Jericho. Not only did God chose one of the most difficult fording spots on the river reveal his power to his people, but a crossing here would have terrified the Canaanites and the inhabitants of Jericho.

As recounted in verse 17, this must have been an amazing sight. *"Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan."* The priests stood in what was the middle of the river as the water completely stopped flowing. Not only did they stand firmly, but they stood on dry ground! The water was completely and miraculously cut off and the people began crossing until everyone made it to the other side. Just as God had parted the Red Sea, so now he parted the Jordan. Just as their parents witnessed the power of God when Israel crossed through the sea on dry ground, so now they witnessed an equally remarkable event. It was a glorious day in the history of Israel! Israel was now a great nation and the people had finally entered the land of promise, just as God had promised Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then Moses. Soon they would take Jericho and then all of Canaan.

Given that Israel's crossing of the Jordan was such a defining moment in Israel's history, it is certainly not an accident that when Jesus seeks out John the Baptist in order to be baptized by him some thirteen centuries later, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, very near to the place where Israel crossed over into the land of promise.

As we read in chapter 3 of Matthew's gospel, *"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be*

⁷ Hess, *Joshua*, 105.

baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

As we know from the subsequent history of Israel, it was not long after the people entered the land of promise that they fell into sin. Sadly, they quickly became just like the pagan Canaanites around them. As we read in Judges 17:6, "*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" Israel will eventually come under the covenant curses for idolatry as well as a host of other sins against YHWH. Several hundred years later, YHWH's long-suffering patience comes to an end and Israel will be removed from the land of promise, with what's left of the nation hauled off into captivity in far away Babylon. While many of the Israelites will eventually return to the land and rebuild, the nation of Israel never had the power nor the glory it possessed soon after it entered Canaan. In fact, by the time of Jesus, even though the temple had been rebuilt with an architectural splendor far exceeding the temple of Solomon, Israel was an occupied country and the temple had come to be viewed as a national status symbol, rather than that place where God dwelt in the midst of his people.

This is why it will take a second Adam, a new Israel, who will perfectly obey the father's will, to earn the true inheritance on behalf of all of God's people. Therefore, in many ways, the ministry of Jesus is a re-enactment of the history of Israel. In the earlier chapters of Matthew, Jesus went down to Egypt and returned to the wilderness of the Galilean hill country, just as Israel came out of Egypt. Jesus is called "my son," a title elsewhere used of Israel. And now that Jesus is about to embark upon his public ministry, Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. This is certainly not an accident.

In Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus now shows himself to be the true ark of the covenant, that one who had actually led Israel through the river on dry ground centuries before. For as Jesus is baptized by John, the blessed Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, equipping him for the beginning of his public ministry. What is more, Jesus, the greater Joshua, is given the heavenly benediction by his father, *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*. Jesus will fulfill all righteousness. He has taken upon himself the baptism of John, undergoing the ordeal in water, through which God's people must pass to receive their promised inheritance. As Noah was saved from the world around by the waters of the flood, as Israel was rescued from Pharaoh's armies by the waters of the Red Sea, so Israel was granted entrance into Canaan by likewise passing through the water of the Jordan River.

Even as the ark of the covenant preceded the nation of Israel as they crossed the river, the long focus of redemptive history was even then pointing the people of God ahead to that day when the true ark of God—that one who spared the people of God during the time of Noah, Moses and Joshua—underwent John's baptism of repentance in the Jordan. Although he was without sin, Jesus did so because he would bear in his own flesh upon the cross all those covenant curses that each one of us truly deserve because of our own sin. Therefore, when Jesus institutes the sacrament of baptism, and commands it of all of God's people, he is directing us to the fact that we too must pass through the waters of judgment before receiving the inheritance, just like Israel did when fleeing Egypt and when entering the land of promise. Since we have witnessed Christian baptism here today, we too have seen what Israel longed to see that day they entered Canaan. All Israel was passing over on dry ground, safely behind Christ, the true ark of the covenant. In baptism, Jesus has given us the sign and seal that is the true ark of God who leads us across our own Jordan River into the land he has promised us. It was a glorious day for Israel, it is a glorious day for us. Amen.