

“So That All the Peoples of the Earth May Know ”

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

Texts: Joshua 4:1-24; John 20:30-31

As Israel’s priests carried the ark of the covenant into the waters of the Jordan, the moment their feet touched the water, the river miraculously stopped flowing. The people of Israel then began crossing through the river on dry ground. As they did so, they were, at long last, entering that good land flowing with milk and honey which God promised to them. But not only was God fulfilling his covenant promises to his people, at the same time through this display of his mighty power, he was instilling fear in the hearts of the Canaanites, causing them to melt away before the approaching Israelites. In fact, once the people of Israel finish crossing the river, they will camp at Gikal, just a few miles from Jericho, that fortified city which blocked Israel’s way into the land of Canaan. It was truly a great day in Israel’s history. It is a day long to be remembered by all.

We are continuing our series on the history of redemption and we are in that section of the Book of Joshua (chapters 3-4), in which Joshua describes Israel’s dramatic entrance into the land of promise. It is important to remember that this dramatic entrance into Canaan was the fulfillment of that covenant promise which God made to Abraham some four hundred years earlier, a promise which was then subsequently reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob, and then finally to Moses as the people were about to leave Egypt at the end of their captivity. Since the book of Joshua opens shortly after Moses’ death, we see throughout the opening chapters God reaffirming this promise to Joshua and then to all Israel. The forty years of wandering throughout the wilderness of the Sinai finally have come to an end.

As we saw last time, Joshua gave the final orders for the people to march the 7 miles or so from Shittim to the banks of the Jordan River. As they marched, the ark of the covenant—which contained the two tables of the law, Aaron’s staff and a jar of manna—went before the people, leading them to the very spot where they would cross the river. Since the ark symbolized the presence of God with his people, the presence of the ark at the front of the Israelite column as they marched was a very clear warning to all those watching—especially in Canaan—that Israel was in covenant relationship with the great king, YHWH, and that YHWH was leading them into the land of promise. And because Israel was in covenant relationship with YHWH, YHWH is Israel’s shield and defender. He will lead his people to their inheritance in Canaan and the Canaanites will not be able to stay or turn God’s hand.

But before the Israelites crossed the river and entered the land, Joshua instructs them that they were to consecrate themselves unto the Lord, by abstaining from sexual relations and ceremonially washing their garments. This symbolic act had not been performed since the days the people were camped at Sinai some forty years before. Most of the people living at that time had already died in the wilderness during the journey to Moab. The consecration of the people unto YHWH is important for a number of reasons. As we saw in the account of Rahab and the two spies, the Canaanites knew full-well that YHWH was the Lord of all the earth. Despite knowing the power of Israel’s God, nevertheless the Canaanites chose to worship “gods” that were nothing more than the figment of their vain imagination. These various tribes also chose to occupy that land they knew YHWH had promised to Israel. And yet, once in the land of Canaan, despite the outward appearance of obedience and devotion, the people of Israel likewise will begin to feel the pull to worship and serve these pagan deities (Baal and Asherah)—the sure sign that human sinfulness lies deep within our hearts. Since YHWH is a jealous God, who demands the full allegiance of his covenant people, the people of Israel must be consecrated (or set apart) unto him before

they enter the land. This is because YHWH will use the people of Israel to accomplish his sovereign purposes—which is to drive the Canaanites from the land and reward his people with their inheritance.

The climax of the account of Israel crossing the Jordan in Joshua chapters 3-4, is found in verses 14-17 of chapter 3, where we read, *“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. 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 account in chapter 4 builds upon this description of the fulfillment of God’s promise that he will do amazing wonders among his people—damming up the waters of the Jordan in a heap so that the people crossed the river on dry ground. In fact, the crossing of the Jordan is so significant in the history of Israel that the Lord commands that this event be commemorated through the building of a memorial—the theme of this sermon.

As we now turn to our text (Joshua 4:1-24), we see that this was an historic day in the history of Israel—a day in which God performed a great miracle in the sight of all his people. It is such an important event that YHWH instructs his people to remember it.

As we pick up with verses 1-3 of chapter 4, we read that *“when all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests’ feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.’”* The most important thing to notice about this account, is that the erection of a memorial to commemorate the crossing of the river was not something the people of Israel instigated on their own. As a matter of fact, this was something commanded of them by YHWH through the mediation of Joshua. The instructions from YHWH are quite specific. The men who will build this monument are to be selected one each from the twelve tribes of Israel. These men were to take twelve stones from the dry river bed from the exact place where the priests had been standing when the river dried up and Israel passed through on dry ground. The men were then to bring these stones to the place where the ark would lead the people of Israel to set up camp, now that they were in Canaan.

And so this is exactly what Joshua does, as recounted in verses 4-5. *“Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel.’”* Having given to the people the instructions from the Lord, the reason behind the construction of this memorial is now revealed in verses 6 and 7: *“that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.”* The memorial will be a sign to ensure that the people of God never forget what happened on this remarkable day.

Commemorating this event will also remind all Israel of the fact that God always keeps his covenant promises. Because we are a weak and sinful people always being pulled back toward sin, we need constant reminding of all that God has done for us!

As a result of this, it was apparent to all Israel that God had placed Joshua in the role of covenant mediator. God would speak to Joshua and then Joshua would speak to God's people. Since Joshua has been repeatedly confirmed in his office, the people now respond to his instructions in willing obedience. *"And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the LORD told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down there."* But, as we will see as the redemptive drama continues to unfold, Israel's obedience to God's commandments will quickly ebb away once the people finally settle in the land. It will take a second Israel (Jesus) to fulfill all righteousness and earn for all of God's people our heavenly inheritance.

Verse 9 presents us with a bit of a quandary. We are now told that *"Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day."* Based upon this assertion, either Joshua built a second memorial in the river bed, which would be visible at those times of the year when the water level was low, or else Joshua set up the stones on the place where the priests stood, which were then subsequently moved by the twelve men to the place where they stood until this day in Gikal.¹ The latter, is more likely.

In any case, one thing becomes crystal clear from Joshua's account, the people moved in great haste while crossing the river. *"For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people passed over in haste."* Given the sheer number of people, animals, and materials involved, this quick crossing was no small feat. Nevertheless, the people did exactly as Joshua had commanded, and they were quickly across and on the opposite shore, finally in Canaan. As we will see in chapter 7, things go well when the people obey God, and not so well when they do not.²

In verses 11-14, Joshua gives the account of what happened once the people completed their crossing. Here, the emphasis falls upon the fact that God has fulfilled all of his promises to Israel.

Verse 11 simply recounts what had just transpired. *"And when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the LORD and the priests passed over before the people."* With everyone safely across the river, the Israelites quickly reform their column with the ark of the covenant out in front. As a sign of the unity of the nation and as a demonstration of the obedience of the people to God's commandments,³ Joshua points out that armed men from those two and a half tribes who were promised land in Moab, not in Canaan, crossed over ahead of the rest of the Israelites. As we read in verses 12-13, *"The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them. About 40,000 ready for war passed over before the LORD for battle, to the plains of Jericho."* Jericho was but six miles away and Israel was able to field an army of some 40,000 men. The Israelites are ready to conquer the land at YHWH's command. The fact that the army "passed before the LORD," is an indication that they were obedient to God's commands both to Moses and Joshua with the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh contributing men to take the promised land, even though they would not dwell there.

¹ Howard, *Joshua*, 136; Hess, *Joshua*, 109.

² Howard, *Joshua*, 137.

³ Howard, *Joshua*, 138.

The question has been raised as to why the Canaanites—who had a reputation for great ferocity—did not attack Israel when they crossed the river, a time when they would be very vulnerable. The answer is probably that the Israelites crossed the river at a location where the Canaanites would never expect the Israelites to cross—an area which was muddy and marshland. The rapid crossing in an unexpected location, clearly caught the Canaanites and the inhabitants of Jericho off-guard. The fact that the Israelites were across the river at an unexpected location in a miraculous way, while the river was at flood stage, indicated that YHWH was acting on behalf of his people. No doubt, when news reached Jericho that the entire nation of Israel had suddenly crossed the river and were but a few miles away headed toward Gilgal, its inhabitants were terrified.

The point of this information about Israel’s military prowess and decisive movement is made plain in verse 14. *“On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him just as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.”* In Joshua 3:7, God promised to exalt Joshua. On this day, YHWH does exactly that. Joshua’s commands were willingly obeyed by the people, Joshua organized the crossing in such a way that the people were both quickly and safely across with the army ready for conquest. It was clear that things came to pass just as YHWH said they would. As a result of this remarkable event, the people stood in awe of Joshua as their leader. Joshua is now the new Moses. Israel has a leader who is YHWH’s chosen man to lead them into the land and on to conquest. The people see Joshua in the same light and with the same respect as they did Moses after the people crossed through the sea on dry ground.⁴ And so on the very day Israel crosses the river, there has been a true changing of the covenant mediator (from Moses to Joshua), and now that the people of God have entered Canaan, a new chapter in Israel’s history is being written.

As we come to the final section of Joshua 4, the we read the final stages of the crossing and the building of the memorial as the Lord had commanded.

Once the people had completed their crossing, we learn in verses 15-18, *“the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan.’ So Joshua commanded the priests, ‘Come up out of the Jordan.’ And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before.”* There are several important things to notice in this passage. One is that the ark of the covenant is now called the “ark of the testimony.” This is yet another way of referring to the covenant that God made with Israel, of which the ark was the visible sign as the people traveled.⁵ As Joshua informs the people of God’s commands, they obey. The priests come up out of the river bed, and immediately upon doing so, the river began flowing again, returning to flood stage. All of the people witness this event in which—through the mediation of Joshua and the priests—God miraculously controls the forces of nature.

This event is surely in the background of Jesus’ disciples minds, when Jesus (the greater Joshua) calms a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee.⁶ In Mark 4:39-41 we read that *“And [Jesus] awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to*

⁴ Howard, *Joshua*, 138-139.

⁵ Howard, *Joshua*, 140.

⁶ Hess, *Joshua*, 114-115.

them, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'" Clearly then, Jesus is that one to whom this miracle at the Jordan River ultimately pointed. Israel depended upon the mediation of Joshua and the priests. Later, it became clear that Jesus was Israel's true mediator and final priest. And he was also Lord of all creation and so when he calmed the storm to protect the disciples, it brought back echoes of the day when Jesus, the true ark of the covenant, caused the waters of the Jordan to pile up in a heap.

Yet another significant thing to note is that once Israel crosses the river and the Jordan returns to flood stage, that the entire nation is now cut-off from any possibility of escape back into Moab. The entire nation of Israel is in Canaan—lock, stock and barrel. There is now no turning back. Israel must rely upon YHWH's power to keep his covenant promise and enable them to defeat the Canaanites. Israel must walk by faith and Israel obey YHWH's commands. Since the people have just witnessed YHWH's amazing provision for the crossing of the Jordan, he has given his people plenty of reason to trust in his covenant promise that he will drive the Canaanites out of the land. This is why YHWH orders the construction of a memorial to this event, because he knows that in our sinfulness and weakness, we always forget the good things that he has done for us.

In verse 19, Joshua gives us more specific information that helps us to see just how significant this event is in terms of redemptive history and Israel's own national future. "*The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho.*" For one thing, the date given corresponds to the tenth day of the month of Nisan (March-April). This was the same day in which—according to Exodus 12:3—the Passover lamb was to be selected, which would then be killed four days later. This is, as we will see in chapter 5, tied to Israel's covenant renewal ceremony at Gilgal (when all those who were born in the wilderness were circumcised) and to the celebration of the Passover, just before they took Jericho. The fact that the crossing occurred on the same day the Passover lambs were to be selected clearly ties the crossing of the Jordan River to Israel's deliverance from Egypt and to the crossing of the Red Sea.⁷ It also tells us that like the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan will begin a new phase in the history of Israel.

The ark of the covenant led the people to Gilgal, close to Jericho, as we read in verse 20—"And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal." This was the place where Israel would camp, renew the covenant and celebrate the Passover. Both a sanctuary and an altar to God would be built here as well. Gilgal was the place where later on in Israel's history, Samuel would offer sacrifices and where Saul was made king. By the time of the prophets, five hundred years later, Gilgal had become closely associated with paganism, and this place became a sad symbol of Israel's apostasy.

But that was the future. Today, having just crossed the river, Gilgal is to be the place where a permanent memorial is to be built to commemorate this day in Israel's history. Once the stones were set up, Joshua reminds Israel of their purpose in verses 21-24. "*And he said to the people of Israel, 'When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.'*"

⁷ Howard, *Joshua*, 141.

The reason why God commanded that this monument be built is two-fold. On the one hand, this stone memorial would remind Israel for generations to come that God alone is the Almighty and that he has the power to do as he promises. Because of this, his people are to worship and serve him only—an important reminder since the people are surrounded on all sides by pagans. But this stone memorial is also to be built so that all the peoples of the earth may know that Israel’s God is the Lord. This echoes the words of Rahab in chapter 2, to the effect that the Canaanites in and around Jericho knew that YHWH was mighty and that he had given Israel the land. And they were terrified as Israel approached.

This remarkable display of God’s power when the people of Israel miraculously crossed the Jordan River has a very important purpose—so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty.

God has fulfilled his covenant promise to his people. The people of Israel see it with their own eyes, the Canaanites fear it in their hearts! There is no excuse not to trust God’s promise, nor to worship and serve false gods as the Canaanites were doing. All Israel knew that God would give them the land, as did the Canaanites, about whom we read in verse 1 of chapter 5, *“As soon as all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel.”* YHWH displayed his mighty power so that all the peoples of the earth might see and know that he is the LORD.

Ironically, the same thing can be seen in the public ministry of Jesus—the greater Joshua. When John was concluding his gospel, he wrote these words: *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* God does not act in dramatic and powerful ways to impress us, like some kind of cosmic magician who can do magic tricks which seemingly have no rational explanation. No, the miracles of God have a very specific purpose—they are signs to strengthen the faith of those who believe, and warnings to those who don’t.

Jesus’ miracles, his death upon the cross along with his bodily resurrection, all demonstrate beyond doubt that God keeps his covenant promise to save his people from their sins through the blood and righteousness of his own son. Indeed, Jesus performed these miracles for the same reason that God provided such a sensational means for Israel to cross the Jordan—that his people might believe in him and in doing so receive the true inheritance, which is life eternal. Furthermore, these miracles remind us that when things get bad and when life turns to vinegar, we can trust God to provide us with a way of escape and we can trust him when he promises that he will never give us more than we can bear. Why? Because God’s track record of keeping his promises is pretty good and he has shown us that he has the power to do as he has promised. Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Jesus conquered death and the grave. This is why we can believe God’s gracious promise that he will turn our suffering to good.

Instead of commanding us to build stone memorials to commemorate what he has done, God commands us to hear the gospel and receive the sacraments. These are the new covenant memorials to God’s faithfulness in keeping his covenant promises for his people. Because, like Israel, we are weak and pulled toward the paganism around us, every time we hear the gospel and come to this table, we see the perpetual promise that God is with us until the end of the age and that he will do as he has promised. We can trust him to help us, console us, to provide for us, to forgive us, to lead and direct us. As Israel went through the river on dry ground, so too Jesus died and rose again. God did this so that all the peoples of the earth may know that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you will have life in his name.