

CROSSING THE JORDAN

Joshua 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:8

“Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’”

As this chapter opens, the people of Israel were at a critical moment in their history at this time. Joshua and his people were getting ready to cross the Jordan River in order to take the possession of the promised land. They had come a long way since their exodus from Egypt. Their journey was supposed to take only a week. But it took them 40 years because they did not obey the word of God. God used the wilderness to train them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Now they were at the gate of the promised land. But an obstacle stood before them to test their faith. It was the River Jordan. The promised land was right before their eyes for their taking, but they had to show faith in God to get there. Let us learn today how God enabled the people of Israel to cross the Jordan River as on dry ground, so that we may cross our personal Jordan River by faith in God.

I. FOLLOW THE ARK OF THE COVENANT (1-4)

Normally the Jordan River was only about 100 feet wide. But during the harvest time, the river was in flood stage. It was overflowing its banks. That was the situation the Israelites faced (15). The river was a mile wide and very deep in many places. Joshua knew that they should not underestimate the raging river. The current of the river was dangerously strong. There were no bridges. There were no ferryboats to carry them. It was a daunting task to help the 1 million plus people to safely cross the river. Many of them were old and weak. Many were children. They had animals and belongings with them. Some could be swept over by the strong current and end up drowned in the Dead Sea. Recall also that this was a new generation of the Israelites. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they had never crossed a sea or a river before. This was uncharted water they were about to tread. And they had never been this way before (4). How could they overcome this obstacle?

There are also many rivers to cross in our life of faith. Our personal Jordan may be something like bad habits that hinder our spiritual growth. Some of us face such internal obstacles as a nagging voice of doubt and lack of courage to make a commitment to Christ. Others face external obstacles such as peer pressure from this unbelieving world or even persecution if you live in countries like China and Sudan. How can we cross our personal Jordan to reach the promised land?

Look at verse 1. *“Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over.”* After hearing the report from the two spies, early in the morning the next day, Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing the river. Joshua was very diligent from early in the morning. Joshua knew what God had told them and carried out God’s plan exactly as he was told. Joshua gave instructions to

the officers about the marching details and to the priests about how to carry the ark of God. Most importantly, Joshua reminded the Israelites about the promises of God.

Look at verses 2-3. *After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it.”* Through his servant Joshua and the officers, God gave a secret to his people on how to successfully cross the Jordan. God did not tell them where the water was shallow. He did not send them ferryboats. Instead, he told them to follow the ark of the covenant. In order to enter the promised land, they had to follow the ark of the covenant. Then what was the ark of the covenant and what did it represent? The ark of the covenant was a golden rectangular box with two cherubim (angels) facing each other on the lid. Ten Commandments, a jar of manna and Aaron’s staff were placed inside the ark. The ark of the covenant represented the word of God. It was a symbol of God’s presence and power among them. The ark represented the person and the promises of God. They knew that when they were with the ark of God, God was present among them.

The ark of the covenant was very important in their cross of the Jordan. Indeed, the focal point of this chapter is the ark of the covenant. The word “ark” appears nine times in this chapter. God told them to constantly keep their eyes on the ark. If the ark moved they were to follow it. During the 40 years of wandering in the desert, the ark of the covenant was in their midst. The ark was with them, but they didn’t pay attention to it. They took it for granted. Now God told Joshua to have the priests to carry the ark in front of the people so that it might guide them in their march toward the promised land. The ark was not to be like their excess baggage to drag with them. It was to put in front and lead them the way. Likewise, we must follow the word of God and our Shepherd Jesus. Sometimes we are tempted to go ahead of God. That’s what Abram did when he couldn’t wait for God’s time and slept with Hagar. The result was that he had Ishmael, a symbol of his compromising life.

Look at verse 4. *“Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it.”* They were told not only to follow the ark from behind, but also to keep a distance from it. Why were they told to keep a distance and not go near the ark? It was to show their reverence toward the God Almighty. They were to respect the holy nature of the ark of the covenant. But also, it was to make sure that everyone had a clear view of the ark. The phrase, *“then you will know which way to go,”* shows that the ark of the covenant would lead their way. The Israelites would follow the ark into the river and onto the promised land. They would accomplish this seemingly impossible task by setting their eyes upon God’s presence, and following only after his presence.

We also need to have a great fear and respect for the word of God. There is a very interesting story about Peter. When Jesus fed the 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, they were greatly impressed. They even intended to make Jesus the king of bread, by force. The next day when Jesus talked about spiritual bread, they insisted on his giving them physical bread, as God had given their fathers bread from heaven. When Jesus taught them only about his blood and flesh they all began to leave him. Only his disciples

were left. Then Jesus asked them, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68). Because Peter had a reverent fear and respect for the word of God in his heart, despite his many failures, he later became a wonderful servant of God.

The people of God must have a reverent fear and respect for the word of God. How can we show our reverent fear and respect for the word of God? We must learn to prepare our Bible study with a prayerful heart. The Bible is the word of God. It is no ordinary book. The word of God is the word of eternal life. May God help us to study the Bible with a reverent fear and respect and obey the word of God from our hearts in our march toward the promised land!

II. THE FAITH OF JOSHUA AND THE PRIESTS (5-10)

Look at verse 5. *Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.”* Joshua knew that their battle was not primarily military in nature, but spiritual. Their success was assured if they obeyed the word of God. So they had to consecrate themselves. Then God would do amazing things among them. What does it mean to consecrate oneself? It means to separate ourselves from the sinful ways of the world. It means to purge from our hearts impure desires and thoughts. It means to repent our sins and humble our hearts before God. It means to move our attention from the worldly things to the word of God. It means to focus our eyes and hearts to God. Joshua told his people to consecrate their hearts with the word of truth so that they could witness the amazing act of God. They had to overcome their complacent or pleasure-seeking attitude. They had to be ready to obey the word of God.

What did Joshua do next? Look at verse 6. *Joshua said to the priests, “Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.” So they took it up and went ahead of them.* Joshua told the priests to take the ark of the covenant and position themselves in front of the people. The ark was to be their guide in their march toward the promised land. Now Joshua was a newly appointed leader, and the priests were independently minded people. But they did not say anything contrary to Joshua. They obeyed him. They respected Joshua, the servant of God, because they respected God.

God was pleased with Joshua when he saw how spiritual he was. Joshua was a military general. But the first thing he told his people do to was to consecrate their hearts before the Lord. Then he worked together with the priests to obey the word of God. Joshua proved himself to be worthy of God’s servant and a spiritual leader of his people. What did God say to him? Look at verse 7. *And the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.”* When Joshua obeyed the word of God, God recognized his leadership and wanted to let the Israelites know that he was the chosen leader for his people. God promised that he would be with Joshua as he was with Moses.

When they were ready to obey the word of God. God gave more specific instructions to Joshua concerning the crossing of the Jordan. Look at verse 8. *“Tell the priests who*

carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’” The priests had a very important role in crossing the Jordan. They had to carry the ark of the covenant. They had to go ahead of the people in their march toward the uncharted territory. They had to go into the swollen river before everyone else did. They had to be the first ones to get their feet wet. Now God told them to go and stand in the middle of the river while all Israel passed by until the whole nation completed the crossing. Look at verse 17. *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 passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.*

What a tremendous responsibility the priests had! What does this mean to us today? We have been praying for our nation to be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:5-6). God wants us to take the responsibility of priests. Jesus is our high priest and we must be his little priests. While on earth, Jesus did what the priests were to do in this passage. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, went ahead of his sheep. He said in John 10: “When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice... I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:4,11). Jesus did not drive his sheep from behind like a cowboy. He set a good example for his sheep to follow. He even washed his disciples’ smelly feet to teach them to love and serve one another. Jesus also protected his sheep. Again he said in John 10: “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep... whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn 10:7,9,10). Jesus protected his disciples like a mother protects her children. On the night he was arrested, Jesus identified himself to the Jewish police. He said them: “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go” (Jn 18:8).

We learn here that to be a kingdom of priests we have to take the responsibility of the priests in this passage. We must learn to obey the word of God wholeheartedly. We must go ahead of our sheep, setting good examples. We must also protect our sheep by standing in the middle of a river. This isn’t easy. What if the dam of the water suddenly breaks and sweeps us away? Like the priests in this passage, we must hold on to God’s promise by faith. We have much to learn from Joshua and the priests in order to become spiritual leaders. Most of all, we must learn of our Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Finally, Joshua said to the Israelites, *“Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God. This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites”* (10). Joshua encouraged them to listen to the words of God. He told them that the crossing of the Jordan was to help them to know that the living God was among them and he would give victory over their enemies in Canaan.

What else did Joshua say to the people? Look at verses 11-13. *“See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the LORD--the Lord of all the earth--set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.”* Joshua told them

what would happen to the Jordan if they obeyed the words of God. The Jordan will stop flowing in its midstream for them to cross safely. The waters will be cut off and stand up in a heap. What a suspenseful story. If it were a movie we could watch it with excitement. But this wasn't a Hollywood fantasy. It was reality. How did the people respond to Joshua?

III. CROSSING THE JORDAN AS ON DRY GROUND (14-17)

The people broke camp to cross the Jordan by faith. The priests carrying the ark of the Lord went ahead of them. They obeyed the words of God. They trusted God's promise even though the floodwaters of the Jordan were raging before their eyes. Look at verses 15-16. *"Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off."* As soon as the feet of the priests touched the stream, the water from upstream stopped flowing. What a spectacular scene! By faith Joshua and his people witnessed the power of God with their own eyes. The priests stood firm in the middle of the river while the 1 million people crossed the river as on dry ground.

The crossing of the Jordan teaches us important spiritual lessons. The Jordan lies between the wilderness and the promised land. Spiritually speaking the Jordan represent an obstacle that we must overcome to bear spiritual fruit in the promised land. Think of it this way. When we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we are set free from our bondage of sin and death. This is the exodus from Egypt. Now we have begun our journey toward the promised land. Some Christians do not let go of their desires for this world and spend much time in the wilderness going around a circle. They are saved, but not yet sanctified. So they show similar tendencies, attitudes and problems of their past sinful life. Such a life does not bear good fruit in God. We must move forward from such fruitless life in wilderness to the promised land. We need to face our Jordan and cross it by faith.

May God help us to have a reverent fear and respect for the word of God! May God help us to commit our lives fully to Jesus and obey his commands! May God help us to cross our personal Jordan and experience victory in God in the promised land! Most of all, may God raise up all of us to be spiritual leaders like Joshua and the priests so that we may be used in his redemptive history!