

Israel Crosses the Jordan River and Enters into the Promised Land

Joshua 3

Joshua 3:1-17 - "Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over. ² So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp; ³ and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. ⁴ Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before."

⁵ And Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." ⁶ Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the Ark of the Covenant and cross over before the people." So they took up the Ark of the Covenant and went before the people.

⁷ And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day 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. ⁸ You shall command the priests who bear the Ark of the Covenant, saying, 'When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.'"

⁹ So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God." ¹⁰ And Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites: ¹¹ Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan. ¹² Now therefore, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe. ¹³ And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap."

¹⁴ So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), ¹⁶ that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷ Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan."

Background Notes

There were no bridges over the Jordan River when Joshua and the children of Israel arrived on the east bank, ready to cross over to the Promised Land -- in fact, even to this day there are not many bridges over the Jordan River. If you cross on one of the bridges today and look down at the Jordan, you will be struck by how small the river is. Your first impression will be, "This is only a brook -- not the mighty Jordan River!" But notice: verse 15 indicates that Israel arrived at the river at harvest time, when the Jordan overflows its banks. So the Jordan was at flood stage, and we know that even a small river can be quite a dangerous and intimidating barrier when it is overflowing its banks. This was true last week when a hurricane went up the east coast, resulting in a lot of flooding and small streams overflowing their banks.

God performed a major miracle for Israel! He cut off the Jordan River about 15-20 miles north of where the people were, upstream at a place called Adam. Verse 16: "...*the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam...*" This miracle was not like the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea. In that miracle, the waters of the Red Sea were parted and were piled up in walls of water on both sides of the people. The people went through the path in between the walls of water.

In the Joshua 3 miracle, the water of the Jordan River was cut off north of the crossing. The water stopped flowing, so that the whole riverbed was dry all the way down to the Dead Sea. Whether God used a natural earthquake and landslide to cut off the waters, we don't know. The Bible doesn't say. In 1927 there was a landslide that cut off the flow of the Jordan for twenty-one hours, so maybe God used a natural earthquake and landslide to accomplish this miracle. In any case, it was a miracle because God controlled the perfect timing of the event. I believe that God performs many miracles like that.

Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off upstream from the people, there was plenty of room in the dry riverbed for many people to cross the river in a short period of time. Remember, there were a couple of million Israelites at this time.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. The Ark of the Covenant is a picture of Christ as our Leader.

1 Corinthians 10 teaches us that the whole journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to the land of Canaan is a type (a spiritual picture) of the Christian life. In this spiritual picture the Ark of the Covenant is a picture of Jesus Christ.

The Ark of the Covenant was kept in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle. The Ark was the meeting place between God and man. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and put the blood of the atoning sacrifice on the mercy seat, the cover of the Ark. Thus the sins of Israel were covered and the relationship between God and His people was maintained. What a picture of Christ we have in the Ark of the Covenant! The blood of Jesus Christ has atoned for our sins.

When the children of Israel traveled, the Ark of the Covenant was carried on the shoulders of the priests in front of the people. The Ark always led the way; the Ark always went before God's people. Notice verse 3: *"and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it."* The Ark always led the people.

In verse 4 we see that there was to be a distance of 2000 cubits, or about 3000 feet between the people and the Ark -- that's thirty football fields! Why the distance? Well, certainly one reason was so that everyone in the spread-out congregation of Israel would be able to see the Ark as it moved out ahead of the people and into the Jordan River. Notice the emphasis on the Ark leading the people, seen also in verse 6: *"Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the Ark of the Covenant and cross over before the people."* And in verse 11: *"Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan."* The Ark of the Covenant is a picture of Christ as our Leader.

2. The Ark of the Covenant is a picture of Christ as our Savior.

The Ark of the Covenant not only led the people -- it led them into the Jordan River. When the people entered the river, it was only a dry riverbed. The waters of the river were cut off when the Ark went ahead of the people into the river. Do you see the spiritual picture?

The water of the Jordan is a picture of the waters of death. The Lord Jesus (pictured in the Ark) had to enter the waters of death so that the way into the land of blessing would be open for us. Because of human sin, death has come into the world. Death separates us from God and His blessings, but Christ went into the waters of death and paid the penalty for sin. As a result, death has been completely conquered!

Verse 16 says that the waters were completely cut off far upstream at a place called Adam. Now isn't that interesting? I think that this is also part of the spiritual picture. Now a little word of caution: we can sometimes go too far in spiritualization, and read too much into types and spiritual pictures -- but I don't think that's the case here. I don't think we're pushing the type too far here, because many times in Scripture the names of people and places have meaning.

God ordained that the waters of the Jordan River would be cut off upstream -- very far away, at Adam. When the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Ark, entered the waters of death He conquered death -- all the way back to Adam! Praise the Lord! Tremendous! Sin has been conquered! The problem of sin, the penalty of sin -- it has all been dealt with -- all the way back to Adam. Now the way into the land of spiritual blessings is opened up for all who will follow the Ark, our Lord Jesus. The Ark of the Covenant is a picture of Christ as our Savior.

Practical Applications

1. Let God exalt you!

Verse 7: *“And the LORD said to Joshua, “This day 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.”* As a result of God’s miracle in cutting off the waters of the Jordan, God was glorified, and Joshua was exalted as well.

We can all learn a lesson from this, can’t we? Too often we go around trying to exalt ourselves, and as a result we’re not really exalted -- and God certainly isn’t glorified! 1 Peter 5:6 says, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time...”

Don’t try to glorify yourself -- whether with your brains, your athletic abilities, your computer skills, your Bible knowledge, or your spiritual gifts. Joshua was a gifted man and a great leader, but he didn’t boast or try to exalt himself. Let God exalt you!

2. Let's not question God about His “flood stage” tactics.

Israel prepared to cross over the Jordan River when it was at flood stage. Why at this time? Why not during the dry season, when you can almost walk across the Jordan in some places? After forty years, couldn’t God have programmed the people to get to the Jordan when it wasn’t at flood stage?

Well, we know the answer, don’t we? God purposely brought the people to the Jordan at flood stage so that He could do a miracle for them, and show them that His mighty power was fighting for them. Furthermore, with a miracle like this, the Canaanites would know for sure that the God of Israel was more powerful than their gods. There are probably many other reasons as well.

Do you ever question God about His “flood stage” tactics? “Lord, why did you allow all these unnecessary problems to come into my life right at this time? Couldn’t you have worked out the timing a little bit better – maybe when I was more prepared to face these difficulties?” Well, maybe God wants to show you His power over difficulties in your life. Maybe He wants to test your commitment to Him through thick and thin. There could be any number of reasons for God’s tactics in our lives.

The lesson is obvious: Let’s not question God about His “flood stage” tactics!