

Into the Promise: A Journey Through Joshua

Lesson Three: What Do These Stones Mean?

Joshua 3-4

Faith is not believing in spite of evidence but obeying in spite of consequence.
~attributed to J. Mark Fox

Having just studied the faith of an individual, Rahab, we now turn our attention to the faith of an entire nation as Israel prepares to cross the Jordan and step *Into the Promise* of the land flowing with milk and honey.

I. Faith Demonstrated (Joshua 3:1-17)

The Israelites break camp in Shittim and move to the edge of the Jordan River, a trek of about seven miles. This is Israel's last chapter in their erratic journey from Egypt to Canaan. They camped for three days on the banks of the Jordan. During most of the year, the Jordan is shallow enough to walk across. But, at the spring flood season, the river overflows its banks and becomes approximately a mile across.

Israel has been waiting for this moment for some 500 years, since God promised the land to Abraham. (An aside, as New Testament believers we are Abraham's descendants according to Galatians 3:29, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise." That's us, beloved! We have been grafted in by grace!)

At the end of three days, the officers command the Israelites to follow the ark of the covenant which the Levitical priests will be carrying on their shoulders. In preparation, Joshua tells the people to consecrate themselves. Their preparation for entering *Into the Promise* of Canaan is a spiritual endeavor, not a military campaign.

The ark represents the presence of God with the Israelites. The people were not to crowd the ark, but trail behind a space of about 1000 yards. This was to respect the holy nature of the ark of the covenant and allow for everyone to be able to see it because they "have not passed this way before" (Joshua 3:4).

This has application for us. The ark pictures Jesus, the treasure chest of blessing. We are to fix our eyes on Jesus and go after Him. With reverential fear for His holiness, we need to set our gaze on Him because we "have not passed this way before." He will see us safely through the obstacles we face, and the spiritual battles waged against us. The writer of Hebrews says it this way, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). Hallelujah! What a Savior!

A. Joshua speaks to the priests (Joshua 3:6-8)

Joshua gives instructions to the priests. They will take up the ark of the covenant and be the first to step into the overflowing river. Even considering God's guidance, this is an impressive act of faith for Joshua and the priests. The river is at flood stage. The raging torrent of the Jordan is moving at about ten miles an hour and is likely filled with debris as it gushes towards the Dead Sea. What they are about to do defies logic and demands faith over fear. Did these men have a moment of hesitation as they stood on the banks of the Jordan? Did they conjure up an image of being swept downstream by the rushing river? Did they contemplate the fact that the weight of the ark would cause them to sink

like a stone if the Lord did not intervene? We don't know, but we do know they committed themselves to God and relied on the faithfulness of His Word.

Joshua instructs the priests to take up the ark and cross over ahead of the people. As the ark begins to move, the people follow at the prescribed distance. The priests have been instructed to step into the edge of the water and then stand still, possibly to allow the waters to begin to recede as God stops it upstream. The courage they demonstrate and the faith their actions reveal is impressive. This is the bold faith that would mark the people of Israel as they move *Into the Promise* of the land of Canaan.

B. Joshua speaks to the people (Joshua 3:9-13)

"Come and hear the words of the Lord your God," Joshua begins as he addresses the people, putting the emphasis on God's revealed Word. As the people prepare to take their steps *Into the Promise* of the Promised Land, Joshua instructs each tribe to choose a man to represent them. We will see what they are tasked with in Joshua 4.

At this point, Joshua reveals God's plan to the people. The waters of the Jordan will not be divided as was the Red Sea. Instead, the water will be cut off upstream, some fifteen to twenty miles north of their crossing point. God will hold back the raging water, forcing it to stand up in a heap and revealing a dry creek bed that will lead *Into the Promise* of covenant blessings. I am reminded of Isaiah 43:2, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you."

As noted in your workbook, "God could've brought them to the crossing at any time. But in His sovereignty, He chooses the season when His power could be shown to a people who would desperately need to see it."¹

C. God displays His power and confirms His presence (Joshua 3:14-17)

Looking out over the Jordan, swollen by spring rains, must be a daunting sight for the children of Israel. They are standing on the threshold of the final leg of their journey out of Egypt and this monumental moment is not lost on them. Joshua, Caleb, and this second generation of Israelites have seen the result of disobedience and been impacted by the judgment meted out to their parents. They have learned from the previous generation that unbelief short-circuits the blessings of God. This lesson steels their resolve and strengthens their faith in their God.

We can assume that they probably have to swallow down their fear as they see and hear the rushing waters of the Jordan. It causes spray to hit their faces, but they are intent on moving forward *Into the Promise* of the land flowing with milk and honey. I imagine mommas tightly grip the hands of their little ones while pulling their babies tightly to their chests and securing them with their wrap. Daddies carry tents and household goods. They nod bravely and give their families a knowing look that radiates courage and confidence. Those in charge of the livestock drop back in order to calm their flocks. In spite of the formidable task ahead of them, the children of Israel are prepared to walk by faith and not sight, obeying God's word to them through Joshua.

As soon as the priests carrying the ark dip their feet in the edge of the water, they pause as they have been instructed while the water stops flowing and stands up in a heap at a city named Adam. This demonstration of God's power assures His people that He is among them. The priests proceed to the middle of the Jordan with the ark of the covenant hoisted on their shoulders while all Israel crosses over on dry ground. It probably takes the better part of the day for all to walk across. God would have had to give the priests supernatural strength to endure the weight of the ark of the covenant for the duration.

What lesson might we learn from this passage? Max Anders helps us,

For believers in the twenty-first century, crossing Jordan is...a movement from a lower level of Christian living to a higher level of Christian living. It describes our entrance to the spiritual warfare of Ephesians, a rejection of a life lived by the flesh and human effort, and the beginning of a life centered in faith and obedience. ²

II. Faith Commemorated (Joshua 4:1-24)

As the people of God stream across the dry creek-bed of the Jordan, cold fear grips the hearts of the inhabitants of Canaan. This is the fearsome invasion they have dreaded for the last forty years.

For the Israelites, God is bringing them out of the dusty, dreary wanderings of the desert into the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. It is a day of great celebration and holy reverence for all God has done on their behalf. A new land. A new leader. A fresh move of God. This is the recipe for revival!

After all the children of Israel have crossed over, Joshua instructs the twelve men previously chosen to go back and pick up twelve stones to build a memorial at Gilgal, the place of their lodging. This memorial will commemorate the faith of the children of Israel and the faithfulness of God. As Anders explains:

Now we understand the actual duties of these twelve important men—to take stones from the middle of the Jordan River where the priests were still standing firmly and carry them to the first campsite in Canaan. The words **put them down** could literally be rendered “cause them to rest,” picking up again a major theme of this book. ³

Joshua takes twelve stones from the bank of the Jordan and sets them up in the middle of the Jordan where the priests are standing. Then Joshua commands the priests to come up from the Jordan. When the priests step out of the Jordan onto dry ground, the waters of the Jordan are unleashed from the city of Adam, and once again overwhelm the banks of the river.

Gilgal, the first place they camped inside the Promised Land, is about a 12-mile hike. There, a memorial is built of the twelve stones as a perpetual testimony to future generations of Israelites and to the other nations of the world. Wiersbe comments:

Whenever the Jewish children asked about the twelve stones at Gilgal, the parents would explain the miracle of the crossing of the river. Then they would add, “But there’s another monument in the middle of the river where the priests stood with the ark. You can’t see it, but it’s there. It reminds us that our old life has been buried, and we must live a new life in obedience to the Lord.” The children would have to accept this fact by faith; and if they did, it could make a great difference in the way they related to God and to His will for their lives. ⁴

The stones of remembrance set up in Gilgal hearken back to Deuteronomy 6:4-9,

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a

sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

God's design for the family is for a living faith to be passed from one generation to another. We cannot believe for our children or force them to make a decision for Christ, but there is much we can do to put them in a place to hear God speak. Seeing a godly example demonstrated in the home will go a long way in impacting and influencing them for the cause of Christ. And being engaged in a church where they can be surrounded by a body of believers and can hear the Word of God preached with passion and power will also help form in them a hunger to know God.

Beloved, having been saved from the bondage of sin (pictured by Egypt) and buried in the waters of baptism (pictured by the Red Sea crossing) and raised to walk in new life (pictured by Canaan), let us boldly cross the Jordan and move permanently *Into the Promise* of the abundant life of Christ.

¹ *Into the Promise*, p. 86

² Gangel, K.O. (2002). *Joshua* (M. Anders, Ed.; p. 57). Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

³ Gangel, K.O. (2002). *Joshua* (M. Anders, Ed.; p. 67–68.) Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

⁴ Wiersbe, W.W. (1996). *Be Strong*, p. 54. Victor Books.