

Joshua Chapter 3

Joshua 3:1 "And Joshua rose early in the morning; and they removed from Shittim, and came to Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over."

“Early in the morning”: The phrase is characteristic of Joshua’s habit of life (compare 6:12; 7:16; 8:10). The similar report concerning our Lord’s rising early to pray (Mark 1:35), and the frequent mention of those who spent the early morning in that spiritual exercise (Job 1:5; Psalms 88:13; 119:147), may point to the content of Joshua’s early morning activities.

This is, probably speaking of early the next morning, after Joshua heard the report of the two spies. He would lose no time getting into position to cross over Jordan. This mass of people, possibly took all day to move to this spot. They moved on the request of Joshua. They have not even questioned how they would cross the Jordan?

Verses 2-4: The people of Israel needed God’s direction because they had “not passed this way heretofore”. It was direction He would provide as they followed the ark.

Joshua 3:2 "And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host;"

At the end of the three days they were bid to prepare food for their expedition, and to go over Jordan (Joshua 1:11).

"That the officers went through the host": The camp of Israel. Very probably the same as in (Joshua 1:10). This was, no doubt, by the order of Joshua, and who was directed to it by the Lord.

We are not told whether the journey had taken three days, or whether they got to this spot near the Jordan and spent two days in preparation of their crossing. That point really does not concern us in this spiritual study. The officers took their orders from Joshua.

Verses 3-4: The “ark” symbolized the presence of the Holy One of Israel (compare Num. 7:89). Because God was due His proper reverence, no careless handling of the ark could be permitted (compare 1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6-7). As the “priests” had carried the ark into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle (Exodus 40:3; compare Num. 4:5-15; Deut. 10:8; 1 Sam. 6:15), they would one day carry it into the Holy of Holies in the temple (1 Kings 8:6).

Joshua 3:3 "And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it."

The “Ark of the Covenant” is a central focus of this chapter and the next. When the Israelites were not in transit, the Ark resided in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle and later in the temple. It represented the presence and the power of God among the people (Exodus 25:22). Jesus is the New Testament believer’s means of access to God. He not only represents God; He is God among His people (John 1:14).

“The Ark”: Symbolized God’s presence going before His people. Kohathites customarily carried the Ark (Num. 4:15; 7:9), but in this unusual case the Levitical priests transported it (as in Joshua 6:6 and 1 Kings 8:3-6).

The Ark of the Covenant symbolized the presence of God. The removal of the Ark to the head of the people was their signal to follow. Christians along with these Israelites, must realize that we must make an effort of our own to follow God.

Joshua 3:4 "Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed [this] way heretofore."

The distance of “two thousand cubits”, more than half a mile, served two purposes: (1) it kept the Israelites far enough away from the holy Ark of the Covenant that they could not touch it, for touching it meant instant death (Num. 4:15; 2 Sam. 6:6-7); and (2) it put the Ark close enough to the three and a half million Israelites that it would never be out of their sight. If their focus was on it, they would be less distracted by fear of the challenges they might face.

Two thousand cubits is about three thousand feet. Looking at the Ark gave them courage to go on. The three thousand feet space helped everyone to be able to see the Ark as it moved. Had they been closer, the people would have seen the other people ahead of them and not the Ark.

Joshua 3:5 "And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you."

In the process of preparing to cross the Jordan River, the people of Israel sanctified themselves, preparing spiritually for God’s wondrous work among them (7:13; Lev. 20:7; 1 Sam. 16:5; Joel 2:16). To be right before God is to be ready for every good thing He will do.

"Sanctify" means to “set apart” for God’s purpose. In this case, it was probably a ceremonial sanctification. It was a separation from worldliness for a short period of time, perhaps overnight.

Joshua 3:6 "And Joshua spake unto the priests, saying, Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass over before the people. And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people."

“The priests” had to follow the Lord’s instructions for carrying the Ark (Exodus 25:12-13; 37:3-5; Num. 4:4-15; Deut. 10:8; 18:1, 5; 31:9).

The confidence of the people was in God, not in their own ability. The Ark passed before them to build their faith that God was with them, and would lead them. Again, it is the Levitical priests who carry the Ark. This is a holy war led of God.

Verses 7-13 (see note on 4:14).

Joshua 3:7 "And the LORD said unto Joshua, This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, [so] I will be with thee."

Out of the tabernacle.

"This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel": By working the miracle afterwards related. Dividing the waters, which was done on this day, and was but the beginning of wonders. For other great and marvelous things were done for him and by him, by which it appeared he was high in the favor of God. Greatly esteemed and honored by him, and so would be great and honorable in the account of the people.

"That they may know that as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee": By dividing the waters of Jordan for him, as he had divided the waters of the Red sea for Moses. Which, as it was a token of his powerful presence with him, this would be a like token of it with Joshua. The Targum is, "as my Word was for the help of Moses, so shall my Word be for thy help."

Under the leadership of Joshua, God had not done the miraculous things He had done with Moses leading. God will now manifest His great miracles under the leadership of Joshua. This will show the people that God is with Joshua, as He was with Moses.

Joshua 3:8 "And thou shalt command the priests that bear the ark of the covenant, saying, When ye are come to the brink of the water of Jordan, ye shall stand still in Jordan."

"Stand still in Jordan": The priests were to stand there to permit time for God's words (verse 9), to stimulate reflection on the greatness of God's eminent action in giving the Land as He showed His presence (verse 10). Also, it was a preparation to allow the people following to get set for God's miracle which stopped the waters for a crossing (verses 13-17).

Notice this is not at Jordan, but in Jordan. The priests will step out in the edge of the Jordan with the ark. This will take a great deal of faith on the priests' part, as well as Joshua's part. The minute the ark, carried by the priests enters the water, the flow of the river stops.

Joshua 3:9 "And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, Come hither, and hear the words of the LORD your God."

Very probably to the door of the tabernacle.

"And hear the words of the Lord your God": Which he was about to deliver to them as from him, and in his name.

Joshua speaks to all of the people, and tells them to listen to the Words of the LORD.

Joshua 3:10 "And Joshua said, Hereby ye 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."

The Canaanite nations mentioned here comprise one of several such lists detailing the peoples who made up the early settlers of Canaan (Gen. 10:15-18; 15:19-21; Exodus 3:8, 17; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Deut. 7:1; 20:17; Joshua 9:1; 11:3; 12:8; 24:11; Judges 3:5). Due to their religious and moral perversity, the Canaanites were to be driven out of the land. Not only did these nations deserve judgment, but Israel's own faith must not become compromised by contact with the corruptions of the Canaanites. The extreme dangers involved in any coexistence with the Canaanites are illustrated by the archaeological findings of Tell Ras Shamra, Ugarit, which detail the gross immorality and social wickedness of early Syro-Palestine.

Canaanite people to be killed or defeated were sinful to the point of extreme (compare Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:24-25). God, as moral judge, has the right to deal with all people, as at the end (Rev. 20:11-15), or any other time when He deems it appropriate for His purposes. The question is not why God chose to destroy these sinners, but why He had let them live so long, and why all sinners are not destroyed far sooner than they are. It is grace that allows any sinner to draw one more breath of life (compare Gen. 2:17; Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 6:23).

Their fathers had experienced the crossing of the Red Sea. Now they will experience the crossing of the Jordan River, and know that God is with them. This will help them to know that God, who can stop the flow of the River Jordan, will drive their enemies out before them. The Canaanites were the descendants of Cain, who slew his brother Abel. All of the above mentioned people were worshipping false gods. God gave them a time to search for Him, and they did not. Now, they are doomed.

Joshua 3:11 "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the LORD of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan."

The Ten Commandments are presented throughout this narrative as a covenant. So (Exodus 34:28), "the words of the covenant, the ten commandments." It must be remembered that a promise precedes all the commandments. "I am Jehovah thy God."

"Passeth before you into Jordan": Not only unto it, but into it, into the river itself. And by the power of him whose presence was with it, the waters of Jordan were to be divided. To give them a passage through it as on dry land, and so it came to pass.

This Ark of the Covenant not only symbolized the presence of God with them, but also was a constant reminder of God's covenant with them.

Joshua 3:12 "Now therefore take you twelve men out of the tribes of Israel, out of every tribe a man."

For what end and purpose is not mentioned. Abarbanel is of the opinion, that they were chosen and appointed, that every man might pitch upon and take a place for his tribe to encamp in, when they came on the other side Jordan. Whether this was Joshua's view or not is not certain. However, the use he made of these, thus provided by divine direction is related (Joshua 4:2).

"And these were to be taken out of the tribes of Israel, out of every tribe a man": Levi not reckoned, having no part in the land. And so we find that tribe left out in other accounts, when there was a choice of twelve men out of each of the tribes (Num. 13:4).

One man of each tribe was chosen to represent his tribe, in a way to be revealed after the crossing of the Jordan.

Joshua 3:13 "And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, [that] the waters of Jordan shall be cut off [from] the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon a heap."

Which they were bid to take up and carry (Joshua 3:6).

"The Lord of all the earth": This shows that not the ark, but the Lord, is called "the Lord of all the earth" (see Joshua 3:11).

"Shall rest in the waters of Jordan": The meaning is, as soon as their feet should touch them. Or they should set their feet in them, when they came to the brink of them.

"That the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above": From above the place where the priests came, and the children of Israel after passed over.

"And they shall stand upon a heap": Or one heap. Stop and rise up high, as if piled up one upon another, and stand unmoved. This had been made known to Joshua by divine revelation, and is what he hints at (Joshua 3:5). And now plainly speaks out, and foretells before it came to pass. And which must serve to magnify Joshua (as in Joshua 3:7). And give him great credit and honor among the people.

This is the same thing that had happened at the Red Sea, except in this case, the Jordan stopped running as the priests stepped into the water. At the Red Sea, the priesthood had not been established.

The water stood at attention at either side, and made a passage way for the ark and the people. The water stopped flowing into this area, for the time the priests were in the water.

Joshua 3:14 "And it came to pass, when the people removed from their tents, to pass over Jordan, and the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people;"

Which they had pitched very near it, upon their removal from Shittim. And in which they had lodged the night past.

"And the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant before the people": At the distance of two thousand cubits.

Verses 15-17: The verb forms used here have the effect of presenting the action in slow motion so that the miracle that takes place can be savored! God brought the Israelites to the "banks" of the "Jordan" at a time when He could miraculously demonstrate His power; specifically "all the time of harvest", when the river was filled to overflowing (1 Chron. 12:15). The "priests" bearing the ark came to the water's edge and stepped forward, obeying Joshua's command. It was just a step, but the waters parted "and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground". Like He did at the Red Sea, Yahweh brought His people through a crossing that they could not undertake in their own strength (Exodus chapter 14). Every big act for God begins with a small step of faith (Heb. 11:29).

Joshua 3:15 "And as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water, (for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,)"

Not to the bank, which was overflowed, but to the extremity of the water overflowing.

"And the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water": Which was doubtless the first they came to, and not the brim or extremity of it on the other side.

"For Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest": In the deeply sunken, tropical valley of the Jordan. The harvest had already commenced, and the snow on Hermon having begun to melt. The "yellow" water of the river stood high and had overflowed its lower bank.

This is just saying, they did not have to walk out into the deep. They just had to step into the edge of the water for the water to stop. The people removed from their tents to follow the ark.

Joshua 3:16 "That the waters which came down from above stood [and] rose up upon a heap very far from the city Adam, that [is] beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, [even] the salt sea, failed, [and] were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho."

"Rose up upon a heap": The God of all power, who created heaven, earth, and all else according to (Gen. Chapter 1), worked miracles here. The waters were dammed up at Adam, a city 15 miles north of the crossing, and also in tributary creeks. Once the miracle was completed, God permitted waters to flow again (4:18), after all the people had walked to the other side on dry ground (3:17). As the Exodus had begun (compare Exodus chapter 14), so it ended.

The damming up of the “waters” at “Adam” and “Zaretan”, some 16 miles above “Jericho” (which was four miles above the Dead Sea), would leave some 20 miles for the Israelites to cross the Jordan River. Apparently God’s presence was felt by all in a gigantic earthquake (compare Judges 5:4; Psalm 114:3-4), which caused the high banks of the Jordan to topple into the river, thus stopping its flow. Similar blockings of the Jordan occurred (in A.D. 1267, and as recently as 1927). Nevertheless, an earthquake does not account for all the miraculous details relative to the Israelites’ crossing of the Jordan at high tide (verse 15), on dry ground (verse 17).

The city Adam, is not mentioned in other Scriptures. Some believe this might have been near the Garden of Eden. I really believe this is speaking of any city that is of this world, in that area. I do not believe it is the name of a city. It is the name of a fallen condition. The Jordan and the Salt Sea stood in a heap, and did not flow.

Joshua 3:17 "And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan."

That is, in one and the same place and posture. Their feet were neither moved by any waters flowing in upon them, nor sunk into any mire. Which one might think was at the bottom of the river. And this may be opposed to their standing in the brink of the water when they came to it, as commanded (Joshua 3:8). Which was but for a while, until the waters were divided and gone away. And then they were to go farther, even into the midst of Jordan, where they were to stand constantly and fixedly. As the Hebrew word signifies, until all were passed over.

"The midst of Jordan": In the middle and deepest part of the river. This manifests how firmly the priests believed the word of the Lord, and confided in his power. Otherwise they would not have dared to stand so long in the midst of the channel of a river. Whose rapid waters stood suspended above them in mountainous heaps. Ready every moment to overwhelm them unless miraculously withheld by the power of God.

"All the Israelites passed over": Where the passage exactly took place cannot now be determined. But the typical significance of the narrative is very impressive. Whether we consider the solemn inauguration of Joshua to his office; or his attestation by the waters of the Jordan. Or the choice of twelve men, one from each tribe, to be the bearers of the twelve stones, and the builders of the monument founded therewith (1 Cor. 3:10; Rev. 21:14). We see types of the other “Joshua,” who was solemnly inaugurated and divinely attested by the rushing waters of the same stream. And who ordained His twelve Apostles to be the Pillars of His Church, and the builders of the Spiritual Temple.

This crossing was to put them in perfect position to take Jericho. The priests stood in the River Jordan, until everyone had passed over safely. They even passed over themselves before the Jordan began to flow again. God is in control of all natural forces upon the earth. The Jordan is just one example.

Joshua Chapter 3 Questions

1. Where did they camp, just before going into the Promised Land?
2. How much later did the officers go through the host?
3. Who will bear the Ark of the Covenant in this situation?
4. The Ark of the Covenant symbolized the _____ of _____.
5. What was the signal the people were to follow?
6. How many cubits behind the ark were the people to be?
7. Why was this necessary?
8. What does "sanctify" mean?
9. What type of sanctification is verse 5 speaking of?
10. Who did Joshua tell to take the ark before the people?
11. The confidence of the people was in _____, not in their own _____.
12. What promise does God make Joshua in verse 7?
13. What must we notice about where the priests stood?
14. What happens, when the priests step into the water?
15. Who will God drive out of the land before them?
16. The Canaanites were the descendants of _____.
17. What was the ark a constant reminder of?
18. How did the miracle at Jordan River differ from the miracle at the Red Sea?
19. Where did the people remove themselves from?
20. Where else is the city Adam mentioned?
21. What does the author believe this to be?
22. When did the Jordan return to its course?