

A Study in Joshua 3:1–10

The Jordan — the Ark of the Covenant — Three Themes: His Leadership, Our Sanctification, His Glory

We are reading Joshua chapter 3, beginning at verse 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. And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host; 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."

"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."

"And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you."

"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."

"And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, Come hither, and hear the words of the LORD your God. 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. Behold, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan."

Three Great Experiences — A Typological Summary

1 Corinthians 10:11 says of the children of Israel: all these things happened to them as types, and have been written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the ages are come. The opening of chapter 3 brings us to the third of three great typical experiences in Israel's history that carry meaning for us as believers.

The first was the Passover in Egypt: the lamb slain, the blood on the door, the judgment passing over those inside. God provided himself a lamb, as Abraham said to Isaac when asked where the sheep was — and that lamb is a type of the Lord Jesus. The Passover lamb was eaten with bitter herbs: not only was the Lord made to suffer at the hands of men, but He was made sin for us, and what He bore under the hand of God was a bitter thing. Our sins are bitter before God. That was where our first dealings with God began — He spared us from the judgment we were due.

The second was the Red Sea: Israel, spared from judgment, was not yet fully delivered. Pharaoh and his hosts pursued them. The Lord allowed that to happen — He could have simply brought Israel across the sea. But He waited for Pharaoh to come, so that He could magnify Himself in the defeat of the enemy. He did not simply deliver His people; He overthrew the one who had held them captive and glorified Himself in doing so. When Israel reached the other side, they sang the song of Moses — a song of redemption and deliverance, magnifying the Lord who had acted for them.

The third is the Jordan, which we now reach. And the Jordan signifies the believer identifying himself with Christ in His death and resurrection. It is not enough to be spared from judgment, and it is not enough to know that the enemy has been defeated and we have been delivered. There is a further step: entering into possession of the inheritance that Christ has won for us. That entrance requires identification with His death and resurrection — crossing Jordan. Two and a half tribes declined to make that full identification: they saw good pastureland east of the Jordan and settled there. Their fighting men would cross to help, but their families and their hearts stayed behind. They were earthly-minded. The land they chose was the same land that Lot had spotted and judged to be a good place. That comparison is not favorable. A believer who stops after saying I am no longer under judgment, the enemy is defeated and I am delivered, and does not press on into the heavenly things that are ours in Christ — that believer is earthly-minded in the same way.

The book of Joshua and the book of Ephesians interpret each other. Joshua is about the hardships and warfare involved in taking possession of what God has given. Ephesians describes the heavenly warfare in which the enemy attempts to prevent us from entering into all that Christ has won for us. The enemy behind us has been defeated. The enemy in front of us — opposing our inheritance — is still active. The Jordan is the entrance into the warfare for possession.

He Rose Early in the Morning — Obedience of Faith

And Joshua rose early in the morning. We have seen this before. Abraham rose early in the morning when he was going to offer up Isaac. In Mark's Gospel, which presents the Lord Jesus as the perfect servant, there is a repeated straightway — straightway He went, straightway He did this. There is in all of this a character of prompt, unhesitating obedience, and we see it now in Joshua at the threshold of the

Jordan.

Joshua is a type of Christ — the name is identical in Hebrew, which is why Hebrews was misread in the King James as Jesus where it means Joshua. But types are imperfect, and Hebrews 5 says of Christ Himself that He learned obedience through the things He suffered — not as to His divine person, but in His manhood here on earth. He was the Son of God becoming the Son of Man and learning, as a man, what it was to walk in perfect submission to the Father's will. That same development of divine life is what we are called to in our own experience, moving through the world as those who are seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. What Joshua passed through pictures what we pass through: the first step is obedience of faith.

The Lord leads step by step. They came from Shittim to the Jordan — and then they lodged there before they passed over. They did not cross immediately upon arriving. The Lord did not rush them. He leads step by step. We can all think of circumstances in which He has done the same with us — brought us to the edge of something and then waited, preparing what comes next before moving us forward. His timing is always right, even when we do not understand the waiting. He is always accomplishing other purposes in the interval.

The Three Days

After three days, the officers went through the host. Three days appear repeatedly in this section of Joshua: Joshua tells the people in chapter 1:11 to prepare for in three days they will cross the Jordan; the spies hide for three days at Rahab's instruction; and now here the camp is at the Jordan for three days before the crossing. Whether or not all three periods are concurrent is not entirely clear, but three is in Scripture the number of full and sufficient testimony — as in Matthew 18:20, where two witnesses are sufficient but two or three constitute full testimony. The three days here may speak of the full and sufficient testimony of God to the work He is about to do, much as the three days associated with the Lord Jesus — in the earth, in the tomb, and rising again — speak of the completeness of what He accomplished.

Three Themes: The Ark, Sanctification, and the Magnifying of Joshua

The opening verses of the chapter contain three themes that run through everything that follows in the crossing of the Jordan.

First: all eyes on the ark. When you see the ark of the covenant of Jehovah your God, and the priests bearing it, then remove from your place and go after it. Not: keep your eyes on the path ahead to see when the waters part. Not: prepare your military plans. The instruction is to watch the ark. The ark is a

type of the Lord Jesus — His person, His presence, His leading. He goes before. He enters the waters first. His people follow, keeping their eye on Him. Peter tells us He has left us an example that we should follow in His steps. We live in a day when lawlessness is common — every man doing what is right in his own eyes — and that spirit can quietly affect the soul until we are reasoning and questioning rather than simply following where He leads. The remedy is the same as it was for Israel: keep your eye on the ark.

How is the ark before us today? The Scriptures. That is how He speaks to us. His word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. A believer who says he is too busy to read it, or finds it too large or too difficult, has taken his eye off the ark. And if the eye is not on Him, how will we know when He moves and in what direction? That is not an academic question. It touches every step of the Christian life. Beyond the word, we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, who takes the things of Christ and shows them to us. He will only give us Christ as our object. If something other than Christ is before us, it was not the Spirit who put it there.

Second: sanctify yourselves. The people had to be in a right state before crossing. The Jordan speaks of identification with Christ in His death and resurrection — death to the flesh, standing no longer in Adam but in the new creation. That cannot be entered into in a fleshly way. Self has to be judged. This is not a one-time act but a condition that must be maintained. There is a difference between intimacy and familiarity. John leaned on the Lord's breast at supper — that was intimacy. The contrast is with Uzzah, who stretched out his hand and touched the ark when the oxen stumbled, and died. The ark was only to be carried by priests on their shoulders; it was never to be touched. Uzzah was so familiar with it that he reached out without thinking. Familiarity treats lightly what is holy. Intimacy never ceases to be reverent. Our nearness to the Lord should never become a ground for treating Him with less than full respect and awe.

Third: Joshua is to be magnified. The Lord says in verse 7: this day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel. Joshua in this respect is a type of the Lord Jesus, who is glorified in all that takes place. The crossing of the Jordan is not Israel's achievement — it is entirely the Lord's work. He stopped the waters; all they did was walk. There is no room for the servant to boast. James warns: be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive a greater judgment. Entering into the heavenly things that are ours in Christ is not a subject for pride. It brings glory to the Lord, not to us. The entire enterprise is to make manifest that as Jehovah was with Moses, so He is with Joshua — and by extension, that as Christ is in the heavenlies, so the heavenly things He has won are truly ours.

Two Thousand Cubits — Distance and Nearness

There shall be a space between you and the ark, 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. Two thousand cubits is roughly half a mile. What a contrast with the Apostle John, who leaned on the Lord's breast at supper, and who spoke of that which our hands have handled of the Word of life. The Israelites were under law. The law required distance. They were not in a state to draw near to the one the ark typified. Their distance from the ark was an index of their state — not only of the ark's holiness but of their own condition under law.

The instruction to keep that distance had a purpose: that ye may know the way by which ye must go, for ye have not passed this way heretofore. They needed to be able to see the ark and follow it into unmapped terrain. They had never crossed the Jordan before. They did not know this path. But by watching the ark at that distance — at that respectful, attentive remove — they could see where it moved and follow accordingly. The distance was not an obstacle to following; it made following possible.

1 John 1:1, written by John who could speak of that which our hands have handled, stands in contrast to the ark which was not to be touched on pain of death. We are brought into a nearness to the Lord that Israel under law could not know. But that nearness — like John's nearness — is never a ground for losing reverence. Moses at the burning bush was told to take off his shoes, for the place where he stood was holy. The intimacy is real; the holiness is also real. Both together characterize our approach to the Lord. The difference is between intimacy, which is genuine and close and personal, and familiarity, which treats the holy as ordinary.

The Living God Is in Your Midst

Joshua says in verse 10: hereby ye shall know that the living God is in your midst, 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 crossing of the Jordan is not only about entering the land — it is about knowing that the living God is in their midst. That knowledge is the foundation of everything. The enemies listed are not small — seven nations, each with its own territory in the land. But the living God is in the midst, and He will without fail drive them out. The word is absolute: without fail.

For us, entering into the heavenly warfare of Ephesians 6 — the wrestling with principalities and powers, with spiritual wickedness in the high places — the foundation is the same. The living God is in our midst. Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and we are seated with Him. The enemies of our inheritance are real, but the one who will without fail overcome them for us is also real, and He is in our midst.

Behold, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan.