



Crossing the Jordan and Setting Up Stones Joshua 3 and 4

Introduction

Merrill Unger, the late professor from Wheaton College, wrote, "In a sense Joshua is to the Old Testament what Ephesians is to the New Testament. Canaan was to the Israelite what 'the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:3) are to the Christian - not a figure of heaven, but an experience here and now of conflict and victory through God's manifested power (Ephesians 6:10-20)".

In Deuteronomy 2:25, God told Moses, "*This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the nations under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you.*"

The day for conquest had come. "God's command to exterminate the Canaanites is demonstrated by archeology to be a moral necessity rather than an impugment of God's justice and goodness, as many rationalistic critics contend. The religious epic literature recovered from Ras Shamra (the ancient Canaanite city of Ugarit in North Syria) has revealed the moral viciousness of the Canaanite cults. These documents attest that Canaanite religion revolved around war, violence, and sexual immorality. Depraved male and female deities were worshipped with foul rites that 'filled up' the iniquity of the land (Genesis 15:16) by the time of Joshua and the Israelite invasion" (Unger's Survey of the Bible, Merrill Unger).

But at the beginning of the relentless Israelite surge, God paused to extend His grace to one Canaanite harlot whose heart was hungry for His grace and mercy. Rahab illustrates that any Canaanite who repented could have found deliverance. But all the rest were hardened unbelievers. *Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe* (Hebrews 11:31). They had the same information as she but refused to believe. And what did she believe? She believed God had given Israel the land and that her people were marked for extinction.

Today, everyone has the same opportunity to repent and believe. God's Word can be taken literally and believed or it can be ignored, leading to eternal destruction (John 3:16). What have you done with God's Word?

Armed with God's promise of victory and the news of a demoralized enemy, Joshua prepared to cross the Jordan with all the people. This lesson covers the Israelites crossing the Jordan on foot at flood time, and the setting up of two groups of twelve stones as a memorial and testimony. The spiritual lessons are even deeper than the river.

Outline of Joshua 3 and 4

- I. Crossing the River Jordan - Joshua 3
- II. Stones of Memorial and Testimony - Joshua 4

I. Crossing the River Jordan - Joshua 3

- A. Final Preparations – Joshua 3:1-6

1. Joshua rose early – 3:1

Then Joshua rose early in the morning: and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan River, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over. This was the last move of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. The next step would be into the river. How many times had they camped since leaving Egypt forty years earlier with no place to call their own? This generation had not known a homeland, but they would soon have a place to call home. These were the first "wandering Jews" and this title would not apply to them again for 1450 years, until 70 A.D. Then, it would last for nearly 2000 years, until 1948, when they would once again be in their ancient homeland, again not without struggle.

Joshua rose early in the morning to begin his faithful journey of leading God's people into their Promised Land. In rising early, he is one of a long line of saints including Abraham (Genesis 22:3), Moses (Exodus 24:4), Gideon (Judges 6:38) Samuel (1 Samuel 9:26), David (1 Samuel 17:20), the Lord Jesus (Mark 1:35), His disciples (Acts 5:21), and many believers throughout history. Is it your habit to begin the day with God, going to His Word for direction, praying through your problems, praising Him for His power over them, and committing the day to Him for His glory? If not, why not?

2. Israel camps at water's edge – 3:2

Good leaders take care of their people. Joshua had the people camp beside the Jordan River for three days, taking the time needed to prepare for the crossing and warfare ahead. This was necessary. We, too, should be well prepared for the battles we face in this world. *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand* (Ephesians 6:12-13).

3. Officers give command to watch the ark – 3:3

Joshua's officers instructed the people, "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." In the same way, we are to keep our eyes upon Jesus, *Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith* (Hebrews 12:2). The ark of the covenant was the symbol of God's presence.

4. The people show reverence - 3:4

The people were to march behind the ark at a distance of two thousand cubits, or about three thousand feet. This is a picture of intimacy combined with reverence, an important combination. Keeping the ark in sight would prevent the people from losing their way. Evidently, the pillar and cloud were no longer to lead them. Everything about the Promised Land would be new and different from the wilderness experience, just as our new life in Christ is totally different from the old life of the flesh.

5. The people consecrate themselves - 3:5-6

Joshua instructed the people, "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." Forty years earlier the people were told to take no leaven with them when leaving Egypt (Exodus 13:3). Leaven typifies sin in its pervasive corruption. A holy God requires a holy people. "Be holy for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).

The consecrated people were then ready to move ahead into the land. Joshua gave the command to the priest to "Cross over before the people."

B. Leadership - Joshua 3:7-8

1. Elevation of Joshua as leader - 3:7

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." It was important for the people to see God at work through Joshua so they would follow him without hesitation.

2. Priestly leadership with the ark - 3:8

"When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death and hell's Destruction
Land me safe on Canaan's side" (from hymn "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah", William Williams, 1745).

So says the old hymn, probably referring more to death than conquest. Nevertheless, the swift-running Jordan

was awesome at flood time, and fear might arise. Still, someone had to go first and who better than the ones appointed to serve God? The priests had to put their feet in the water before God would act.

One step at a time seems to be God's way for those walking the path of faith, *for we walk by faith and not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7). It is God's way of doing things and worldly people do not understand. "But even they recognize that a leader is often called upon to take risks. Barnabas and Paul were described as men who had *risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 15:26). And Paul could write of Epaphroditus, *for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life* (Philippians 2:30). The RSV renders this *risking his life*. Such is the mark of true disciples of the Lord Jesus" (Conquest and Victory, Carl Armerding).

Are you willing to step out in faith, saying with Queen Esther, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16)? Or are you content never to know what God will do for those who trust Him wholeheartedly, with no reservations?

C. Encouraging the People - Joshua 3:9-13

Joshua seemed jubilant as he encouraged the people with the words of "the LORD your God".

1. Presence and Power of the LORD - 3:10

"By this you shall know that the living God is among you and that He will without fail drive out the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites." These seven enemy nations represent the hosts of Satan arrayed against us.

2. Person of the covenant - 3:11

"Behold the ark of the covenant of the LORD of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan." The LORD God is no tribal God. He alone is God over all the nations. He was identified with the ark of the covenant as the symbol of His presence among His people and they went forward into the Promised Land.

3. Promise of protection - 3:12-13

God revealed His plan to protect them by stopping the flow of water from upriver. In crossing the Red Sea, the previous generation experienced the water as walls on either side (Exodus 14:22). God rarely, if ever, does things in exactly the same way. He is more creative than that. Both generations, however, crossed over on dry ground. When God commands the waters to flee, every drop goes (See Psalm 114:3,5).

D. Marching Forward with the Ark - Joshua
3:14-17

With the waters piled high some distance to their right, the people followed the ark into the riverbed.

1. Priest's feet at floodtide - 3:15-16

It was spring, the time of harvest, just after the snow melted. The river was swift and high, overflowing its banks. But as soon as the priests put their feet in the water, it ceased to flow. It piled up some thirty miles to the north near a city named Adam. It was through the first man, Adam, that sin and death entered this world (Romans 5:12) and it was through another "Joshua" that they were reversed (Hebrews 2:14-15). While the Israelites crossed over the dry Jordan riverbed, there were no waters to flow into the Salt Sea to the south.

2. The ark and "the *all*" - 3:17

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 (emphasis added).

The priests patiently *stood firm* while the nation passed by, probably on both sides of the ark, keeping their distance. They were *steadfast, immovable* (1 Corinthians 15:58) until the last person was safely across. What a dramatic scene! So shall Jesus Christ lose none from all the Father has given Him, but will raise up each and every one *at the last day* (John 6:39-40).

"Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast,
There shall my soul find comfort,
There is my soul at rest" (from hymn "Safe in the Arms of Jesus", Fanny J. Crosby, 1858).

II. Stones of Memorial and Testimony - Joshua 4

There were two sets of memorial stones set up. The first was in Gilgal where the Israelites camped their first night in Canaan. The second was set up by Joshua in the riverbed.

A. The first set of stones - 4:1-8

1. The twelve appointed men - 4:1-5

After all had crossed over the river, Joshua called for one man from each of the twelve tribes to return to the midst of the Jordan where the priests stood with the ark. They were to carry out one stone apiece on their shoulders and pile the twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, on the west bank. In Matthew

24:30, Jesus referred all humanity as *all the tribes of the earth*. This expression is also used in Revelation 1:7.

2. Explanation of the memorial - 4:6-8

The stones would preserve the memory of God's mighty power and elicit questions from future generations. Young children often ask, "What's that, Mommy?" or "What's that for, Daddy?" Many parents find their patience exhausted before the child runs out of questions! God equipped us with a natural inquisitiveness and curiosity to use as He intended, to ask questions relevant to life.

Do you realize the importance of giving good, honest answers to help encourage respect for truth? God intends us to question, not to stimulate doubts but to increase faith through knowledge. Inquiry opens up areas of interest and communication as a wonderful means to build relationships and give testimony of God's goodness. When asked about the pile of stones, the Israelites would have opportunity to share the miraculous crossing of the Jordan on dry land.

3. The meaning of the stones

The stones commemorated the nation's crossing of the river by virtue of the extraordinary cutting off of the waters, allowing the Israelites to pass over to their Promised Land.

This appeared miraculous, and certainly the timing was. But there is a natural explanation possible that does not take away from the awesome event. Earthquakes have several times dislodged portions of the cliffs a few miles above the location where the Israelites crossed. The latest was in 1927 when the flow of the river was stopped for twenty-one hours.

The crossing of the river on dry ground made the Hebrews' arrival into Canaan dramatic and startling both for the Canaanites to observe and for future generations to remember. There are many events throughout history that teach us what God can do as LORD of heaven and earth.

B. The second set of stones - 4:9-11

1. Separation

Joshua set up the second set of stones. These were left in the *midst of the Jordan* and must have been visible when the water was low. *They are there to this day* refers to the time when the Book of Joshua was written.

2. Significance

What was the significance of this second memorial?

“The Jordan was formed as the result of a rift-valley, and is the lowest depression on earth. Its headwaters collect into Lake Huleh some two hundred and thirty feet above sea level. But ten miles south of the Lake of Galilee the river drops to nearly seven hundred feet below the level of the Mediterranean. At the north end of the Dead Sea, the river descends, equally rapidly, to nearly thirteen hundred feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is the lowest spot on earth” (The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Atlas, E.M. Blaiklock, editor).

Crossing over Jordan into conflict and battle to gain possession of the promised possession is a type, or picture, of the Christian dying to self in order to come into the inheritance purchased for him or her on the cross by our Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism is another symbol of this death to the old life and rising to a new life.

As the lowest depression on earth, the Jordan is an appropriate symbol. Sin is depressing and the depths of sin are what Jesus experienced for us. *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus tasted sin to its dregs when He died a criminal's death on the despised cross. He took our place and bore our shame. *He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities* (Isaiah 53:5).

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote, *do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin* (Romans 6:3-6).

Paul described himself as *crucified with Christ* (Galatians 2:20). Jesus Christ challenged His followers, *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me”* (Luke 9:23). In doing this, believers are identified with Him in His death in order that we might share with Him in His resurrection.

The second set of stones is the testimony to the willingness of the nation for a “baptism” of death in the waters of the Jordan and their emergence on the other side by the grace of God. Are you identified with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death?

B. The Militant Nation - Joshua 4:12-19

1. Two and a half tribes - 4:12-13

Just as Moses had commanded (Numbers 32:17-22), the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Joshua 4:13 states that forty thousand armed men from these tribes crossed the Jordan, while the total male population in those tribes twenty years of age or older totaled 136,930 (Numbers 26:7, 18, 34). The rest of the fighting men must have stayed on the eastern side of the Jordan to protect the families and livestock.

2. Joshua magnified - 4:14

God did as He had promised in exalting Joshua (3:7). All the glory belonged to God, but Joshua commanded the priests and gave directions to the officers. God exalted His servant, Joshua, so the people might honor and obey him as they had Moses.

3. Return of the waters - 4:15-19

At Joshua's command, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant joined the rest of the Israelite nation on the western bank of the Jordan River. As their feet stepped up onto the riverbank, the waters of the Jordan returned to their rightful place and covered their path. The nation had taken a giant step of faith forward with God. An exciting new chapter in their history was about to begin.

C. Meaning of the Memorials - Joshua 4:20-24

The memorial stones were a visual aid for parents to instruct their children and tell the story of how God had miraculously brought them into the Promised Land. However, the broader purpose was *“That all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever”* (Joshua 4:24). The stones would be a perpetual reminder and testimony to all people of God's mighty power at work for those who follow Him by faith.

Applications

1. Joshua rose early to face the day. What change will you make to begin your day with God? Will you set your alarm clock earlier each morning? Or perhaps you might share family devotions at the breakfast table? Will you pray and ask God what He would have you do to make time for Him each morning?
2. What step of faith is God calling you to take to figuratively get your feet wet and trust Him to work His mighty power through you?
3. What child in your family or neighborhood will you speak to this week about the greatness of God?