

Joshua 3

Crossing the Jordan

Joshua 3:1-6 describes the preparations; **3:7- 4:14** the passage of the people; and **4:15-18**, the passage of the ark itself.

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."

Until this point, Israel has been in an exodus from Egypt. The march from Shittim to Jordan is their first march under Joshua and the first stage of their "coming in" to the Promised Land.

Because the Jordan was at full spring flood, the Canaanites of Jericho might have been thinking it would be weeks at least until Israel's army - 600,000, besides the women, children, herds and possessions - could safely cross to attack them.

"*Shittim*" = field or grove of acacias, from the Greek *akis*; "thorn" Acacia trees are beautiful. But the large, sharp thorns are occupied by symbiotic stinging ants that protect the tree from destructive herbivores. Jesus crown of thorns is believed to have been acacia thorns.

When Israel arrived in Shittim originally, bad things happened:

- **Numbers 25:1** - "And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab."

The Symbolism of Thorns

Thorns were symbols of the curse on the earth and mankind at the Fall:

- **Genesis 3:18** - "Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field..."

In Jesus' parable of the sower, the meaning of the thorns is made clear:

- **Mark 4:18-19** - "And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful."

The thorns also represent Canaanite influences we allow to remain in the land:

- **Numbers 33:55** - "But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you; then it shall come to pass, that those which ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell."

Thorns became a byword for sons (or the fruit) of rebellion:

- **2 Samuel 23:6** - "But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away..."

Some scholars translate Belial from Hebrew as "worthless" (*Beli yo'il*), while others translate it as "yokeless" (*Beli ol*), "may he have no rising" or "never to rise" (*Beli ya'al*).

Thorns afflict us because of sloth, or the absence of zeal:

- **Proverbs 24:31** - "I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down."

Shittim = Thorns

Israel's movement from Shittim - the field of acacias - to cross the Jordan is a type of Christ's being forced to wear the crown of thorns before His walk to the cross.

- **Mark 15:17** - "And they clothed him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head..."

Worn as a crown, these "thorny" temptations attacked Jesus' mind.

- **Hebrews 4:15** - Jesus was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."

By overcoming these temptations, Jesus also gives us the power to meet them and to overcome.

Because acacia wood was also used in the building of the ark and the Tabernacle, it shows that our temptations and weaknesses can be transformed into good; riding on our high places, which were once used for idolatry.

A New Signal to Move

Joshua 3:2-3 - "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."

The usual sign in the wilderness for the people to move had been when the pillar of cloud was taken up (**Numbers 9:17**). Then the standard of Judah and Reuben would follow, with the ark being carried after them, in the center of the tribes. But tradition says the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire ceased at the death of Moses. So this new sign of guidance had to be communicated to the people. The ark would go before everyone, and it would move at the command of Joshua.

[This was foreshadowed in the first three-day journey from Mount Sinai in **Numbers 10:33**, when it was said "the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them"]

Another difference - The Levite Kohathites had been responsible for carrying the ark in the wilderness. But now the priests are told to carry it when crossing the Jordan.

Rashi - in forty-eight places, the priests were called Levites.

The Babylonian Talmud (T. Bab. Sotah, fol. 33. 2) states that there are three places in which the priests are said to bear the ark; here, and when they surrounded Jericho, **Joshua 6:6**; and when it was returned to its place in the times of David, **2 Samuel 15:29**; and Kimchi and Abarbinel observe a fourth, when it was brought into Solomon's temple, **1 Kings 8:6**.

Why this change? Some say the guidance of the cloud signified "the dark and cloudy dispensation of the law," which ceased. Whereas the ark, like Joshua, is a type of Christ, our forerunner. Priests carrying the ark and its mercy seat represent believers as "a nation of priests" who preach and point to Christ's grace, showing the way to enter the promised Rest.

The Space of a Sabbath Day's Journey

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."

Rashi says this merely means, "You have not gone in this manner until now." But there's much more to these words.

Balance Between Personal Experience and Community

They were told to stay close enough to follow the ark, but far enough away so that all could see it.

The limit set by the rabbis of a Sabbath day's journey was 2,000 cubits (about 3,000 to 3,600 feet or almost 3/4 mile) from one's house or domicile, which was derived from this statement found in Joshua 3:4. This was the distance between the ark and the people on their march, and was also assumed to be the distance between the tents of the people and the tabernacle during the sojourn in the wilderness.

The 2,000-cubit limits around the Levitical cities (**Numbers 35:5**) may have suggested the limit of the Sabbath day's journey also.

In **Acts 1:12** it designates the distance from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, to which Jesus led His disciples on the day of His ascension.

For us, this means that to remain in the Rest we must stay close to the ark and Who it

represents - the ark contains the law written on the heart, and the mercy seat where sins are blotted out by His sacrificial blood. But not to follow so close that our individual experience with Christ causes us to forget we are part of a larger group - the Israel of God, His church and Bride. Everyone has to see what we see. The distance is partly out of reverence for the holiness of the Ark. It also implies we must stop and count the cost before running to follow. The 2000-cubit distance from the ark is analogous to the previous command about guidance - to wait until the cloud is taken up.

i.e. "Be patient. Let the course of the ark disclose itself, before you try to follow it, that you can know the way you must go, for ye have not passed this way before."

"If you are not quite sure what God wants you to do, you may be quite sure that He does not at present want you to do anything." - *MacLaren's Expositions*

But in the Promised Land the "cloud of doubt" is no longer what governs our response to God's guidance (**Numbers 9:17**). Looking to and following Joshua/Jesus comprises our new operating instructions. And we know we're always where we're supposed to be because the promise was "wherever our feet shall tread." (**Joshua 1:3**)

New Journey, New Song, New Name

"Ye have not passed this way heretofore" - We can't judge things by past experiences. Entering into our spiritual inheritance will be a journey away from the normal, the usual, the habitual, and the expected. We will need to keep our eye on the Ark, representing the atonement - and on Jesus, whose death made it possible. Boldness, courage and strength are required, and will be supplied by God if we wait on Him and show up for the battle. The story of Israel's conquest of Canaan is a template for our own self discovery and exploration, as inner strongholds of idolatry and rebellion against God are defeated and fall, and His kingdom occupies that ground. The miraculous battle for Jericho is an example of the unexpected ways God deals with us. And every day is new and full of surprises. We are in fact "a new creature."

- **2 Corinthians 5:17** - "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

Our Guidance Now is the Cross

Israel following the lead of the Ark at the command of Joshua is reflected in Jesus' invitation/command to his disciples to "follow me." And we follow Him all the way to the cross. We follow Him all the way to His resurrection. And we will follow Him in His ascension in the end.

- **Matthew 10:38** - "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me"

- **Luke 9:23-25** - "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.."

If we do stray off the path, the Spirit redirects our focus to Christ:

- **Isaiah 30:21** - "And when ye turn to the right hand or when ye turn to the left, thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it."

Prepare for 'Wonders'

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

How did Joshua know this? He didn't. I think he looked at the impossible situation, and in faith figured God would have to perform a miracle to get them across. (He was in the same situation as Abraham and Isaac (**Genesis 22**). The only way for God to keep His promise would be to resurrect Isaac.)

"sanctify" - *qadash* - set apart, consecrate, purify

"wonders" - *pala'* - to distinguish, separate, arduous, marvelous, extraordinary

Two different words that can mean the same thing. Israel is to *set themselves apart* to God because God is going to do something that will *set Him apart* from other gods.

Joshua backed up his faith by action - ordering the priests to pick up the Ark and go forward.

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 bearing the Ark on their shoulders (**Numbers 7:9**) represent believers - a nation of priests - bearing His name in proclaiming the Gospel. In the same way, Paul was said to be "a chosen vessel unto me, to *bear my name* before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (**Acts 9:15**)

Possibly they continued the custom of Moses:

- **Numbers 10:35** - "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee."

It's at this point where God speaks:

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."

The Targum is, "as my Word was for the help of Moses, so shall my Word be for thy help."

Compare the completion of this in **Joshua 4:14**, "on that day the Lord magnified Joshua."

The passage of Jordan was to be to Joshua what the giving of the law at Sinai was to Moses, "that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever" (**Exodus 19:9**). And the dividing of the waters of the Jordan would compare with the dividing of the waters of the Red Sea.

Origen compares Joshua's crossing of the Jordan and God's "magnifying his name" with Jesus' baptism at the same spot, and the Father's simultaneous recognition of Him:

- **Matthew 3:17** - "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

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."

i.e. the priests would step into the edge of the water. Then (see **Joshua 3:14**) the waters would be cut off, the priests would walk into the middle of the Jordan, where they would remain until all the people had passed over.

Joshua Addresses the People

Joshua 3:9-10 - "And Joshua said to the children of Israel, Come here, 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."

The entire possession of the land of Canaan is promised to them again. Experiencing this miraculous crossing would seal it into their minds.

[In the same way, our personal experience of salvation, or "crossing of the Jordan" - the relief of forgiveness, the peace and joy that fill our hearts - gives us a certainty that God is with us even when troubles, trials and doubt later afflict us.]

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

By emphasizing "the living God" in **verse 10** and "the Lord of all the earth" here, Joshua is again showing the certainty of Israel possessing the land of Canaan, dispossessing

the inhabitants, who worship dead idols.

"earth" = *erets* - earth, land

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

i.e. choose out 12 men - they will be employed later, after the crossing, to set up 12 stone memorials as evidence for later generations that this miracle occurred (see **Joshua 4:2**).

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 an heap."

The Actual Account of the Crossing

Joshua 3:14-16 - "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; 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), That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an 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."

i.e. The waters were miraculously heaped up; they spread out - overflowing the banks - until they reached on the one side to the town of Adam, and on the other side to Zaretan. Where the priests stood, the river dried up, and the remaining water drained away on its journey to the Dead Sea.

The miracle happened between "Adam" and "Zeretan." Zeretan means "their distress." Adam/edom represents the first man, Adam. Together they point to the distress of the curse on Adam (**Genesis 3**), from which salvation through Joshua/Jesus redeems us.

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."

At the Red Sea (**Exodus 14:21-22**), the people were told to "stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." The waters were split before any of them entered (contrary to some rabbinical accounts). Here at the Jordan, the priests were told to step into the river first. That act of faith and obedience would coincide with the drying up of the waters.