

The Book of Joshua

Lesson 3: Crossing the Jordan on Dry Ground -- Joshua 3:1-4:24

Picture the scene at first light. Israel has been camped at Shittim, and now Joshua rouses the people early and brings them down to the very edge of the Jordan. They lodge there before they cross over. And the Jordan is not a quiet stream you wade across without thinking. The text tells us plainly that 'Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest' (3:15). This is the river at its angriest, swollen with the spring melt, brown and churning and wide. On the far side lies the land God promised to Abraham four hundred years before. Between the promise and its fulfillment runs a flood. And there is no bridge.

For three days the officers move through the camp with strange instructions. Watch for the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, they say, and when you see the priests carrying it move out, then you move out and follow it. Keep your distance, about two thousand cubits, 'that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore' (3:4). It is a haunting line. You have not been this way before. None of them had. The whole generation that crossed the Red Sea had died in the wilderness. These are their children, and the only map they are given is a golden box carried on the shoulders of priests, going on ahead of them into water they cannot cross.

Then comes the heart of it, and it is the kind of detail you could miss in a hurry. God does not part the river and then invite the priests to walk through on dry ground. He tells them to walk into the flood first. '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,' the waters will be cut off (3:13). The miracle waits for the wet foot. The priests have to step off the bank and into a river that is still running before anything happens. Faith goes first; the path opens second. And when those feet touch the water, the river stands up in a heap, a great distance away at a city called Adam, and the people pass over on dry ground.

But God is not finished, and this is the part that tells you what He cares about. While the whole nation crosses, He stops everything to command a memorial. Twelve men, one from each tribe, are to reach down into the dry riverbed where the priests are standing and lift out twelve stones, and carry them to the other side, and pile them up. Why? So that when your children ask in time to come, 'What mean ye by these stones?' you will have a story to tell them: 'the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark' (4:7). God moves heaven and earth to bring His people in, and then He builds a classroom out of rocks on the bank of a river, so that the faith of this morning would not die with this generation. This lesson is about a God who leads, who acts when His people obey, whose presence is holy, and who will not let His mighty works be forgotten.

Group Discussion: Why do you think God required the priests to step into the flooding Jordan before the waters were cut off, rather than parting the river first and then letting them walk across on dry ground? What does that order teach us about the kind of faith God calls for?

Personal Reflection: When has God asked you to take a step of obedience before you could see how it would work out, and how did your willingness, or unwillingness, to get your feet wet shape what happened next?

Read Joshua 3:1–4:24

Study Questions

1. In Joshua 3:7–13, God exalts Joshua and tells the priests bearing the ark to step into the Jordan before the waters part. What does the ark going before the people, and the priests' obedience preceding the miracle, teach us about how God leads His people and what He requires of them?
2. The officers told Israel to follow the ark because 'ye have not passed this way heretofore' (3:4). Where in your own life are you facing a way you have not passed before, and how willing are you to keep your eyes on God's leading rather than on a map you wish you had?
3. Joshua 3:13–17 records that the waters were cut off only after the priests' feet touched the brim of the water, and the people crossed on dry ground. What does this God-ordained order, obedience first and miracle second, reveal about the nature of trusting, obedient faith?
4. The priests had to stand still in the middle of the riverbed, holding the ark, while the entire nation passed over (3:17). When God calls you to hold your ground in a hard place so that others can move forward, how do you respond, and where is He asking you to stand firm now?

5. Repeatedly the text centers everything on the ark of the covenant, called 'the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth' (3:11, 13). What does the ark, and the careful distance the people kept from it, teach us about the holiness of God's presence among His people?
6. Joshua 3:5 says, 'Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the Lord will do wonders among you.' What would it look like for you to prepare your own heart to meet a holy God, and what in your life might need to be set apart before you can expect Him to work?
7. In Joshua 4:21-24 the reason for the memorial stones is given twice: so that future generations would ask and be told what God did, and so that 'all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty.' What does this teach us about God's purpose in His mighty works, both for His own people and for the watching world?
8. The whole memorial was built so that when children asked, 'What mean ye by these stones?' (4:6, 21), their parents would have an answer. What story of God's faithfulness are you actively passing on to the next generation, and who is watching to see whether your faith is worth inheriting?
9. Joshua 4:23 deliberately ties this crossing to the Red Sea: 'as the Lord your God did to the Red sea.' Drawing on the whole passage, explain how the ark, the priests' obedient faith, the dry-ground crossing, and the memorial stones together reveal the holiness, faithfulness, and saving power of God, and how His command to tell the next generation places a sacred duty on us to hand down what He has done.

10. Looking back over the whole crossing, from the wet feet of the priests to the twelve stones piled on the bank, name one specific way the Lord Jesus is forming you through this passage, whether in stepping out in obedience, in reverencing His holiness, or in handing your faith to those who come after you.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Exodus 14:21–22, the parting of the Red Sea that this crossing deliberately echoes, the Lord opening a path on dry ground for His people; Deuteronomy 6:6–9, the command to teach God’s works diligently to your children, the same duty enshrined in the memorial stones; Psalm 78:1–7, telling the next generation the praises and wonders of the Lord so they would set their hope in God; Joshua 24:15, Joshua’s later charge that as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord, the natural fruit of a faith passed on; Romans 15:4, that whatever was written before was written for our learning, that we might have hope.

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