

Notes on Joshua 3

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III. Israel Crosses the Jordan River – Joshua 3,4

The Crossing on Dry Ground – Joshua 3

Verses 1-4

1. What barrier stood between Israel and the land (see MAP)?
2. What sign would be given to the people to tell when they should go forward?
3. How closely should the people follow? Why?
4. Application: What lessons can we learn about guidance for our lives?
5. How was the ark carried? Why (give **b/c/v**)?

The ark to lead the people

Having received the spies' report, early in the morning the people left their camp and approached the Jordan. Before crossing it, however, they camped there a while. After three days the officers of the people gave the people their instructions (this could be three days after they had left camp or perhaps three days after some other event – this is not clear to me).

The people were instructed to follow the ark of the covenant. The priests and Levites would bear the ark, as God had commanded them to do (Numbers 4:15; Exodus 25:14). But in this case the ark would go before the people and they would follow it, with a space of 2000 cubits (3000 feet – over half a mile) between the ark and the people. The only explanation for this arrangement was that this would show them what way to travel. The people would not know what way to travel otherwise, since they had never passed that way before.

Of course, the whole way was new to them, so they would not know the way to travel without guidance. But God could have chosen some other way to guide them. In particular, there would have been no obvious reason for such a large space between the people and the ark. God chose this way by His Divine wisdom, and the people would obey if they trusted Him. As the story shows, the ark was to pass first into the river and cause it to dry up so the people could pass on dry land. Perhaps this is why God wanted such a large space of separation between it and the people.

In a similar sense, we all need God's guidance every day of our lives. Each of us has one and only one life in which to live to please God and receive His blessing of eternal life. If we wish to pass successfully, we too need to follow His guidance, for we have never passed through life before. He guides us through His word. We may think we know better than what His word says, or we may think we don't need His word but can go on our own. Then we get into trouble. If we trust Him, we will realize that He is the only One who really knows what life is about and the best way to live it. So we will obey His will in faith. [Matthew 15:9,13; Galatians 1:8,9; 2 John 9-11; Colossians 3:17; Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 14:12; 3:5,6; Revelation 22:18,19; 1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:13]

Verses 5-8

6. What did Joshua say was about to happen (v5)? What was the purpose of it (vv 7,10)?
7. Application: what does this show about the purpose of miracles?
8. What were the priests carrying the ark to do at the river?

Instructions for crossing the river

Joshua then instructed the people to sanctify themselves, since God would do wonders (miracles) among them. To sanctify is to make holy or set apart. This was done in various ways, depending of God's specific commands. This account does not tell us exactly what was involved

in this case, so we do not know the specifics. It may have involved simply dedication of heart or attitude, or it may have involved other specifics simply not listed here. (See 7:13; Ex. 19:10,11.)

Joshua then instructed the priests who carried the ark to begin the march. They were to precede the people, as just described in vv 3,4, so they were to take up the ark and begin.

The Lord instructed Joshua (at that moment or earlier) that God was going to do a miracle. As with all miracles this would confirm that God was working through a man of His choosing, so the people would know to believe the words of that man. (See Mark 16:20; John 5:36; 20:30,31; Acts 2:22; 14:3; 2 Corinthians 12:11,12; Hebrews 2:3,4; 1 Kings 18:36-39; Exodus 4:1-9; 7:3-5; 14:30,31.)

God had already called Joshua to take Moses' place as leader and the people had promised to follow him (chap. 1). But great faith would be required of the people and of Joshua. The previous generation had approached the land before and had turned back due to lack of faith. So God here gave miraculous confirmation so the people would have faith to know God was working through Joshua as He had worked through Moses.

The miracle God had planned would require the priests bearing the ark to walk into the waters of the Jordan and stand there. Further instructions will follow in the next verses.

This would especially take faith because, as we will see later, the Jordan was at flood stage at this time. Walking out into a river of any size at any time would take some faith, but especially when it was flooding. Near the city of Jericho, the Jordan is about to enter the Dead Sea. It is at its largest size of any point. Crossing it here at flood stage would be especially dangerous and difficult. Perhaps the inhabitants thought the army of Israel could not cross at all at that time. In any case, Joshua told the priests to have the faith to carry the ark into the river.

Verses 9-13

9. What did Joshua specifically predict was going to happen (v13)?

10. What can we learn from the fact Joshua knew and predicted ahead of time what was about to happen?

The miracle predicted

Joshua then called the people together and described the miracle that God was about to perform. He said that it would confirm to the people that God would keep His promise to give them the land. Miracles not only served to confirm that God was working through a specific inspired man, but they also gave the people evidence to believe in God Himself. They should know that He is the true God and they should follow Him in faith. Note that He is here called the Lord of all the earth. He was not just the Lord of one nation or one part of the world, but the Lord of the whole earth.

Joshua said that the priests would carry the ark before them (as described above – vv 3,4,6) and would cross the Jordan before the people. But when the feet of the priests carrying the ark stood in the river, God would cause the water to be stopped upstream from them. The river would be blocked, so the water would stand up in a heap and would cease to flow downstream.

We are not told what would block the river, but clearly it would be an act of God. And it was surely a miracle in that Joshua knew ahead of time that it would happen and when it would happen. It would happen at the very time that the priests would walk into the river. Perhaps it was also miraculous in that the water may have been held in a way that was impossible by natural means, as the Red Sea had been held when Israel had crossed it. But in any case, the fact that it happened when Joshua said so would prove that God was working through Joshua. Note the crossing of the Jordan was a sign that Joshua was God's appointed leader just as the crossing of the Red Sea had been a sign the Moses was God's appointed leader.

Joshua also told each of the twelve tribes to appoint a man for a special job. We are not here told what that job was, but it will be revealed in the next chapter. As Israel crossed the river, these twelve men would have a special job to do.

Verses 14-17

11. What was unusual about the river at this time (v15)? (Think: Why was this significant?)
12. Describe the crossing of the river.

The people cross the Jordan

So as Joshua commanded, the people began to march as led by the priests. When the priests carrying the ark stepped into the river, the waters rose in a heap upstream at a town named Adam, near Zaretan. The water flowing toward the Salt or Dead Sea was cut off, and the people crossed the river on dry ground across from Jericho.

The priests then stood with the ark in the middle of the river bed until all the people crossed. As long as they stayed in the river, the water continued to be held back so the people could cross.

V15 tells us, as mentioned in previous notes, that this happened at the time of harvest when Jordan was a flood stage. This miracle may have been hard enough any time, but especially so when the river was flooded.

This would also take faith on the part of the people to cross the river. They might wonder if, at any moment, the water would start to come again with them in the middle of the river. They needed faith that God would allow them to cross safely.

The miracle that resulted thereby confirmed God's power and the people's faith in Him. He had done a miracle to allow them to cross the river. It would also confirm the people's faith in Joshua as God's spokesman, since the miracle had occurred at his word.

And finally, the miracle would no doubt become known to the people of Jericho and the other people of the land. This would cause them to further fear Israel and her God even more than they were already frightened. They had already heard of the crossing of the Red Sea (2:10). Knowing that Israel had likewise miraculously crossed the Jordan to enter their own land would further demoralize the Canaanites.

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