

Life Markers Joshua 3 & 4

One of the most famous stories in all of the Bible occurs when Moses finally leads the Israelites out of Egypt after 400 years of bondage. This story is told in the book of Exodus. After the plagues over Egypt, Pharaoh tells Moses to take Moses' people away from Egypt. After they leave, however, Pharaoh has a change of heart and rallies his army to pursue them.

Stuck between being pursued by the most fearsome military in the world and the impassability of the Red Sea in front of them, Israel's escape from Egypt is only made possible by the miracle of God parting the Red Sea in order for them to pass on dry land.

After 40 years of wandering and fighting enemies in the wilderness, God is now poised to do another miracle to confirm the belief of a new Israelites. The facts of what God does in Joshua 3 & 4 are meant to draw an inclusion around Israel's wilderness experience. God began their journey to the Promised Land by parting the Red Sea and he will conclude the journey by parting the River Jordan.

Read together the story of how God commands Israel to pass from the eastern bank of the Jordan to the western bank.

Joshua 3 & 4

Then Joshua rose early in the morning and they set out from Shittim. And they came to the Jordan, he and all the people of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over. ² At the end of three days the officers went through the camp ³ and commanded the people, "As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it. ⁴ Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits^[a] in length. Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before." ⁵ Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." ⁶ And Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.

⁷ The Lord said to Joshua, "Today 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. ⁸ And as for you, command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'" ⁹ And Joshua said to the people of Israel, "Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God." ¹⁰ And Joshua said, "Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. ¹¹ Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth^[b] is passing over before you into the Jordan. ¹² Now therefore take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man. ¹³ And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the

Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.”

¹⁴ So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), ¹⁶ the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷ Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

⁴ When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, ² “Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, ³ and command them, saying, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests’ feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.’” ⁴ Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. ⁵ And Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, ⁶ that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.”

⁸ And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the Lord told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down ^[c] there. ⁹ And Joshua set up ^[d] twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day. ¹⁰ For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua.

The people passed over in haste. ¹¹ And when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the Lord and the priests passed over before the people. ¹² The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them. ¹³ About 40,000 ready for war passed over before the Lord for battle, to the plains of Jericho. ¹⁴ On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him just as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.

¹⁵ And the Lord said to Joshua, ¹⁶ “Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan.” ¹⁷ So Joshua commanded the priests, “Come up out of the Jordan.” ¹⁸ And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before.

¹⁹ The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. ²⁰ And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. ²¹ And he said to the people of Israel, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ²² then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ ²³ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, ²⁴ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”

This is a long bit of narrative, but focus on the following elements: 1) The expectation that faith will show itself in obeying the word that God is giving through Joshua to GET MOVING! 2) The centrality of the ark of the covenant, which symbolizes the presence of God amongst the people 3) the use of memorials so that God’s works are not forgotten by future generations of Israelites.

Discussion Questions

- **Why do you think it is important for God to do a miracle in the sight of all the people? Couldn’t they just take time to build boats or wait for the waters to recede after the spring?**
- **What is the significance that this takes place during the time that Israel had been commanded by Moses to observe the Passover?**
- **What role did the obedience of the priests and the people play in what God did?**
- **What is the significance of the ark of the covenant standing in the middle of the Jordan while the people cross over?**
- **How do you observe faith at work in this story?**
- **Why is it important that the men crossed “ready for war?”**
- **What sign does Joshua leave in the Jordan?**
- **What sign do the twelve tribes leave after they cross the Jordan?**
- **Why would God command a sign be left?**
- **What are some significant spiritual markers that you can point to in the history of your own life that continue to feed your faith today?**