

## **Title: Crossing the Jordan - Joshua 3-4**

**Purpose:** Learning from a character study of Rahab how God works in salvation fleshed out by 6 echoes that appear both backward and forward in time.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### Waiting time

Just a couple of weeks ago there was a report in the Telegraph about people's attention span. Microsoft had done a study on 2,000 people by doing EEG's (Electroencephalograms) where they could estimate how long people could maintain their attention.

The study suggested that now people have slightly less attention span than a goldfish. In 2000 it was about 12 seconds and now it is down to just 8 with that of a goldfish believed to be at 9 seconds!

I think the reality is that waiting especially in children is very difficult, but that said waiting in adults is also just as tricky.

### Rahab

Last week we left off seeing Rahab the prostitute as she bids the 2 Israelites farewell and then promptly ties the scarlet ribbon in her window.

Q. How long will she have to wait before they return? She doesn't know, a week - maybe a month - but one thing is sure - she believes that they will be back and when they come she will be ready for them and she and her family will be safe.

### For the Israelites

Thinking from the perspective of the Israelites - the waiting time to cross over into the promised land has been somewhat longer in coming.

Due to their own failure - they could have entered in and taken possession of this spacious land, this land of milk and honey, 38 years earlier - but the older generation was marked by unbelief and rebellion against God and they have all fallen in the desert with Joshua and Caleb being the only exceptions.

Q. So how long exactly have the Israelites been waiting since the promise of the land was first promised?

Well for this you have to go all the way back to Abraham in Genesis 12 - there in Verses 6&7 we read:

"Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.

**At that time the Canaanites were in the land.** The Lord appeared to Abram and said, '**To your offspring I will give this land.**' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him."

So this is in the region of 470 years which is more or a less half of a millennium!

It is encouraging to know that none of God's promises grow old - none of them are subject to decay or some sort of

mission or scope creep!! None of God's words ever fall to the ground unfulfilled.

Q. Have you given up on God's faithfulness? You think that because maybe his promises seemed delayed that they are necessarily decayed!

Let this passage remind you that whether your wait is short or long - you know that God will always come through in FAITHFULNESS.

#### Anticipation - no complaints

One thing that is interesting with this new generation of Israelites, as they wait in **anticipation**, is that there is **no grumbling or complaining**.

**Yes**, they have enjoyed the **wonderful encouragement** of having defeated **Sihon** and **Og** the 2 kings of the Amorites on the North Eastern side of the Jordan (this is the portion of land that those of **Gad**, **Reuben** and **the half-tribe of Manasseh** have requested as their tribal allotment).

**Before we just think it just nothing** that they are at ease as they wait - we ought to bear in mind a couple of things:

- **FIRST** is the fact that they have not yet even set foot into Canaan.

Thus far only 4 people have been in the land - Joshua & Caleb - Spy #1 & Spy #2 (who were God's missionaries to Rahab).

So at this stage there is everything still to play for.

Of course we might conclude that they are in the first flush of enthusiasm.

- **THE SECOND aspect**, worth thinking about, is the fact that they are **now camped within sight of the Jordan river**.

Now although I don't precisely know far it was from the camp to the **river** - one thing we do know is that the **river** was in flood - Verse 15 "Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest." - So it was overflowing its normal banks and was, who knows, perhaps a mile wide at this time of year.

Now imagine all the Israelites spread out along a few miles of the river.

Q. Do you wonder what effect it might have had on them?

Q. Do you think that they would have wondered about quite how they were going to get across it? Maybe they looked at it to see if it seemed to be shrinking. Maybe they imagining that it would get down to a size when they just might be able to safely ford it.

One thing seems to be clear is that God does not suspend the need for us to simply trust Him and move forward in faith.

#### Crossing the Jordan - what it represents

Now an important question that we ought to be clear about at this point as the Israelites are poised to cross the River is:

\*\*\* Q. What, at a spiritual level, does crossing the Jordan represent? \*\*\*

You see:

- **IF - Egypt** => represented the land of bondage, of slavery in sin
- **IF - the 40 years in the wilderness** => represented a period of largely failure, misery and unbelief

**Q. What now then** - does **the crossing** the Jordan AND **entrance** into the land of promise **represent**?

"Land" x87 in Joshua

After all - this word "**land**" turns up no less than 87 times in this book of Joshua **and it is all because** this book is the record of Israel's **ENTERING - CONQUERING** and **CLAIMING** God's intended inheritance, His intended land of promise.

And as we have been saying that promise of the land has its roots going as far back as the time of Abraham.

Certain misleading hymns

It is a little unfortunate, I think, that some of well known and loved **hymns** and **spirituals** - have not really helped us in being clear about what crossing the Jordan is supposed to mean.

Take for example: the SPIRITUAL: "**Swing Low, Sweet Chariot**" (quite a favourite in the Rugby Union world):

The chorus goes:

*Swing low, sweet chariot  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home.*  
And then the **first verse** says this:

I looked over **Jordan**, and what did I see  
Coming for to carry me home?  
A band of angels coming after me,  
Coming for to carry me home.

**OR** take that GREAT HYMN of William Williams (1745) - "**Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah**"

The last verse reads:

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;**  
songs of praises, songs of praises,  
I will ever give to thee,  
I will ever give to thee.

You see the book of Joshua is not about the death of God's people but the exact reverse - it's about entering into their life.

The book of Joshua contains, alongside the good things, - **battles, defeats, sins and failures** - and these are clearly *\*not\** the activities that are going on in heaven.

**Alan Redpath** (one time pastor of Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh) has this to say in his book:

## "Victorious Christian Living - Studies in the Book of Joshua":

"The crossing of Jordan does not illustrate the passing of a soul into eternity, but rather does it illustrate the passing of a Christian from one level of Christian life to another. It marks the end of the self-life and the beginning of the Christ-life: the end of a life lived on the principle of effort and the beginning of a life lived on the principle of faith and obedience. Between these two rolls the might river Jordan - a river of IMPOSSIBILITY."

### Focussing in

Now easing into these 2 chapters in Joshua it is important that we don't allow the fact that we are covering 2 chapters mean that we lose sight of the wood for the trees as we say. We don't want to somehow get submerged in the various details and lose the key themes.

We were studying the other night in **HOUSEGROUP the first of 2 parts looking at the connected chapters of Revelation 4 & 5** and it was a rather similar thing that we were experiencing.

The apostle John is being invited up into the "heavenly realms" and is being given this prophetic vision of what is taken place there. And there are all many of strange sights and strange creatures and strange numbers and symbolisms - and it would have been pretty easy, I guess, for someone to have gone away with their heads full and wondered to themselves: "What was that all about? There was so much going on!".

And so what we did to safeguard ourselves from making that mistake - we early on posed the question:

Q. What is the FOCUS of the passage?

Q. Is there anything being presented here which is time and again getting referred to?

And the answer was YES - it is **the "THRONE OF GOD"** - 16 times in the 2 chapters we had the word THRONE and that's a lot.

Similarly here - with **the CROSSING OF THE JORDAN** in **Joshua chapters 3 & 4** - we have something else that is mentioned 16 times and that is **the "ARK OF THE COVENANT"**.

So clearly that is one "ORGANISING FEATURE" if you like.

The other one that we would amiss if we didn't mention - is the putting up of the stone memorial that is the main story feature in chapter 4.

So for the rest of our time I want to pick up these twin focal points and see what they have to teach us - So #1:

## **1] THE ARK OF THE COVENANT**

### What it was

For those of you not very familiar with the ark - this was the #1 item of furniture that was in the Tabernacle - that mobile temple that God gave to the Israelites through Moses in the desert.

There were just **6 ITEMS OF FURNITURE**:

- **the golden table** - to hold the 12 loaves of the bread of the presence
- **the 7 branched golden lampstand** - to light up the Holy Place

- **the altar of incense** - before the curtain dividing the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies
- **the bronze laver** - for holding clean water for ceremonial washing
- **the large bronze altar** - for the offering of the various sacrifices by fire
- And finally - **the ark of the covenant** - (which was the only one that was actually placed in the Holy of Holies).

It was a rectangular chest of wood covered inside and out with gold. On top of it there was a lid of pure gold (called the mercy seat) and on top of that were 2 Cherubs (or Cherubim) that were made of hammered gold and were facing each other with touching wings.

It contained inside:

- the 2 tablets of the ten commandments
- a golden jar containing manna
- **AND ALSO** Aaron's rod that budded

And it was on top of this **ARK** that the very presence of the living God would descend.

Just one single time every year (on the Day of Atonement) was the high priest allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and only then with a censer containing hot coals and incense so that the smoke of the incense would obscure this place where the presence of God would descend.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the people are told that they needed to stand at a distance of about 1/2 a mile away at all times.

It is one thing that God may be considered as our great **Heavenly & Divine COMPANION** but we should never begin to think that He is somehow OUR BUDDY!!

Three times in the OT we read of the LORD God Almighty being "**enthroned between the Cherubim**" and so we see that this is an earthly symbol of: **where God's presence is and where He is seated on His throne as the Sovereign Ruler over all things.**

The Ark goes first

**And one of the first things** we notice about crossing the Jordan is the reference to HOLINESS, to the need for CONSECRATION, for SANCTIFICATION.

See how Joshua calls for consecration there in **Verse 5** \*READ\*- let me read the observation of one commentator that has certainly given me some pause for thought. He says:

**(Alan Redpath)** "The wonder-working power of God depends always on the sanctification of his people. A sovereign God so limits His sovereignty in speaking through His church to a world that is under judgment that He goes no further in saving the sinner than the saint is prepared to go in holiness before the Lord. The level on which God meets men depends on the level on which we as Christians are prepared to meet our Lord."

**A second thing**, close on the heels of the first, is that the ARK goes first.

**Chapter 3 verse 6** reads: "Joshua said to the priests, 'Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.' So they took it up and went ahead of them."

And I guess so many times that we fail in our desire to live as victors and overcomers rather than victims is because we

look to ourselves rather than looking to God.

We, perhaps, trail God along behind as a kind of "person of last resort". If I can't seem to get it together spiritually then perhaps I am going to turn to God in some moment of desperation.

A God of the gaps, a God of last and not first resort.

### Faith is required

Notice too how **faith is required for us to cross over into this land of promise.**

See what the priests carrying the ark are told:

Verse 8 "... When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river."

We do wonder whether they quite knew what was going to happen ahead of time. I suspect that they did not - that they simply had to trust God to prevail for them because otherwise within a few metres of stepping into this River in spate, they were going to be up to their necks!

However, their faith (and by extension ours too) was rewarded:

Verse 15ff "Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea ) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground."

### Continuity - a sign of God's unchanging faithfulness

Another thing we observe is that **God is unchanging in His faithfulness.**

You can't really miss the way in which opening the Red Sea and opening the River Jordan are somewhat similar.

So we see that :

- **God is present in power** when he brings us to the point of spiritual birth - (as symbolized by the crossing of the Red Sea out of bondage to sin)
- **ALSO God is present in power** when he enables us to cross over from a life lived in the flesh to a new life lived in and through the indwelling spirit

Looking at these two mighty works of God - they helpfully remind us of His power in the two domains of:

- **SALVATION**
- and what we call **SANCTIFICATION** - that is our growth in holiness and Christ-likeness over time

Perhaps you remember what the writer to the letter to the Hebrews says in the NT in:

Hebrews 12 verse 2 "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the **AUTHOR** and **PERFECTER** of our faith..."

Jesus and His great indwelling power is what is needed BOTH at the start of our spiritual lives and also for every

subsequent step.

That is why Paul says this in:

Philippians chapter 1 "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, **BEING CONFIDENT OF THIS**, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Now I want to end off by moving from the ARK OF GOD'S PRESENCE & POWER to this memorial that Joshua sets up.

So #1 The Ark of the Covenant - #2:

## 2] THE MEMORIAL OF STONES

### A surprise

And right away there is a bit of a surprise here - \*not\* that God might direct Joshua to make this memorial monument - after all Moses was constantly telling the new generation of the Israelites throughout the previous book of Deuteronomy that they need to remember, that they must make sure that they do \*not\* forget.

But what is surprising is the fact that it appears that there were TWO monuments and \*not\* ONE.

### NIV translation - Chapter 4 Verse 9

If you have the NIV translation in your hand - (and that's the translation that we use as a church - and that is for the good reason that it is **one of the most readable AND** is at the same time **mostly a good & accurate translation**).

So if you have an NIV Chapter 4 and Verse 9 will read like this:

"Joshua set up **THE** twelve stones **THAT HAD BEEN** in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day."

And that seems all very fine and dandy - EXCEPT for the fact that they have added in some wording that simply isn't there - BUT WHICH THEY FEEL WAS INTENDED or, in some way IMPLIED, by the original author.

If I now read it again taking out the bits they put in - it reads:

"Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day."

And so now you see that the text seems to indicate that there were 2 monuments and not just the more obvious one that they set up in the camp at Gilgal.

### Why did they take it out?

You might well ask the question - so Q. Why did the NIV translators not leave it as it was?

Well I think it comes down to the fact that it seems unexpected. We are clear about the fact that there was to be one monument but there doesn't seem to be any prior notification that they are to produce essentially 2 of these memorials.

And I guess also because the memorial in the river would appear to be rather redundant given that it would be soon covered over by the waters when they flow back to their original state.

So which way to go?

Q. So which way should we go on this?

Well let me just add in a few other things:

- **ONE THING** is that - the writers of the Greek translation of the OT Hebrew text (that's what is called the Septuagint LXX) they add their own interpretive gloss too:

So Verse 9 reads "Joshua **ALSO** set **ANOTHER** twelve stones among them by the Jordan in the place by the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and the stones are there until today."

So these Jewish translators of the sacred text were working around 250BC.

- **ALSO** - simply because a section of Scripture makes more sense to our minds a particular way - doesn't give us (in my opinion) full license to assume that the Hebrew text was simply missing things out because they were implicit.
- **FINALLY** - although you will have some commentators that will side with the NIV on this matter - what you do observe is that pretty well every other Bible translation (and I checked 20 other translations) have it translated literally. (Only the Message Bible - seemed to go along the same line as the NIV).

What they were set up for

Now we don't need to ask what these memorials were for because the explanation is given further down in Chapter 4

Verse 20ff reads "And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, 'In the future **when your descendants ask their fathers, 'WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?'** tell them,

'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over.

He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that **the hand of the Lord is powerful** AND so **that you might always fear the Lord your God.**"

It's a sign for everyone - believer and unbeliever - Jew and pagan alike - that GOD IS ALMIGHTY.

Second - a sign for believers - that they might ALWAYS FEAR THE LORD (which as Proverbs tells us is "the beginning of wisdom.")

Provoking questions - a good thing

We should observe in passing that it is a good thing that these memorials are around - BECAUSE it is understood, it is assumed, that they will function in a particularly healthy way.

Q. What is that?

Well, they will serve to PROVOKE QUESTIONING amongst those that do not yet know their meaning.



It is a very healthy thing that religious, that Christian discussion and questioning goes on.

By way of application - Q. How do we do this in our churches, how do we do this in our homes?

Well I think one way is by deliberately building space & time, deliberately having occasions that foster - spiritual conversation.

As one person noted in regard to evangelism - if we don't have occasions when we naturally "talk Christian" with each other then we should not be surprised if we find it unnatural to "talk Christian" with unbelievers.

## CONCLUSION

So a question that clearly remains as we come to wrap up is:

Q. What was the point of the memorial that Joshua built in the middle of the river?

### Lake near Geneva

There is a lake near Geneva where at certain times - when a drought is affecting that region - that a particular stone becomes visible. Someone has inscribed on the stone the words: "When you read this, weep!" (It is because, of course, drought is clearly ravaging the land.)

However Joshua's pile of rocks in the centre of the River would presumably, on rare occasions become visible and the reverse response would be suitable: "When you see this - Remember & Rejoice!"

You see there is a wonderful truth marked by these stones - there was a day in history when God Himself, in the Person of His Son, went down into the depths for us so that we too might go down with Him - down into death.

2 Corinthians 5 verse 14 "If one died for all, then all died."

As Paul says: "I have been crucified with Christ it is no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me."

If you consider yourself a Christian here this morning do you know how to answer the question:

Q. Have you died with Christ?

- Died to your reputation
- Died to your personal worldly ambitions
- Died to your self-esteem
- Died even to some of the normal & natural things of life that might not be part of God's will for your life

If the constantly visible sign at Gilgal reminded them that they had crossed over into NEWNESS of Resurrection Life

then the other memorial was the FLIPSIDE - that there was a day when everything had changed - and they too had gone down into the depths - along with the ARK

- that they had DIED WITH CHRIST
- that they had LEFT THEIR OLD LIFE - THEIR SELF-LIFE behind

### Missionary Testimony

Let me end with a story of a missionary to China:

She recounted that before she had gone out to China a friend of hers had said to her:

"What on earth are you going to bury yourself in China for? You'll never stand the climate, you'll be dead in 6 months!"

The missionary turned to the girl and said:

"My dear girl, I want you to know that 5 years ago I died. When Jesus called me to China, I bowed my head at the Cross and died to everything with the exception of God and China."

Maybe it is in the spiritual drought time we need to see again the stark truth that we have died with Christ - so that newness of life may emerge and that there is a wonder-working power that is then given us.

Let's pray - AMEN.