

"Crossing the Jordan"

Joshua 3

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Introduction:

As you know, in about an hour, we are headed north for the 14th year of Beaver Creek Bible Camp. We are thankful for those of you who are trusting us with your children, we are thankful for those of you who will be serving on the staff. Including staff and children, there are 21 people who will be attending from the Four Lakes congregation. We are thankful for those of who have made it financially possible for those kids to go to camp who would not normally have the finances to attend. As most of you know, the camp started in 1997, and at that time we had a grand total 14 campers!

- Back in 1997, there were a grand total of eight boys—perhaps some of you will remember Josh Kiel whose parents were members here at Four Lakes. Perhaps others will remember Brett Rutherford, who was the preacher here in Madison at the time. To me, it looks as if there may be a rubber glove on top of Brett's head... I, of course, am the skinny guy on the left.
- And then in the Girls' Cabin, there were six girls. Some of you may recognize Angie Wille, whose parents were members at Crystal Lake. And perhaps some here will remember April Kiel, whose parents were members here at Four Lakes. This year, it looks as if we will have around 65 campers, and including staff and their small children, we will have around 106 people on the campgrounds. So the camp has really grown over the years, and we would ask that you remember us in your prayers over the next seven days!
- The weather looks as if it might cooperate! The rain will end today, and then we are looking forward to highs in the mid-70's to low-80's. We are thankful for that, and we certainly hope that this forecast is accurate. But as we get started this morning, I would like to share one of my favorite camp photos of all time...



- ...this was taken last year as Philip Varney was getting ready to lead us on the 2-hour hike to the Big Falls. And what I love about this is that it represents the challenge of leading any group of kids. Notice that Philip is bravely pointing the way to the Falls, he is prepared and ready to go...and yet when you look around, you realize that nobody cares! And this is not just Philip; usually I'm the one they're ignoring; I just happened to be the one who took this picture. Nevertheless, this is the challenge of leadership (I'm sure the elders here this morning understand this challenge), and so we ask again that you remember us in your prayers over the next seven days.



This morning as we think about stepping out on an adventure, I would like for us to consider the crossing of the Jordan River as it is described for us in the Old Testament book of **Joshua**, in **Joshua 3**. In our pew Bibles, the passage starts on **page 350**. You may remember that after forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the nation of Israel was once again standing on the banks of the Jordan River. Last time, it didn't go too well. So here we are forty years later, and we find that God is getting ready to try it again, this time under the leadership of Joshua. Joshua also sends spies, they connect with Rahab the prostitute in the city of Jericho, they come back with a good report, and we pick up this morning as they once again face the Jordan River.

As far as rivers go, the Jordan just barely qualifies as a river. As far as I can tell, it is one of the only rivers in the world that does not eventually drain into an ocean. The Jordan, of course, empties into the Dead Sea, where the water simply evaporates, making the Dead Sea very salty. Most of the Jordan is actually below sea level, and today it is basically not much more than a sewage canal. So much water has been siphoned off for irrigation that there is really not too much left. It is extremely polluted. But as a river, it is nothing like the Mississippi or the Nile, but perhaps we could compare it with the Eau Claire River up at camp, where it is so shallow that we often need to drag our canoes, or maybe we could compare it with the Yahara River here in Madison.

The Jordan River was not big—normally only about a hundred feet across right here. But we are about to find that they were crossing during the time of year when the Jordan would flood, when it would overflow its banks, actually by quite a bit. Some

commentaries, in fact, claim that the Jordan could flood to roughly a mile across (this is pretty hard for me to believe—it almost seems like one of those figures that someone threw out there in a sermon many years ago, and it has been copied over and over again), but even if it was not fully a mile wide, any kind of flooded river could have easily turned into a huge obstacle for 2 or 3 million people (with their flocks, and children, and the elderly, and so on). That is where we pick up with **Joshua 3...**

¹ Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and he and all the sons of Israel set out from Shittim and came to the Jordan, and they lodged there before they crossed. ² At the end of three days the officers went through the midst of the camp; ³ and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God with the Levitical priests carrying it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. ⁴ "However, there shall be between you and it a distance of about 2,000 cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which 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 spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over ahead of the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went ahead of the people. ⁷ Now the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you. ⁸ "You shall, moreover, command the priests who are carrying the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.' " ⁹ Then Joshua said to the sons of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God." ¹⁰ Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will assuredly dispossess from before you the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Hivite, the Perizzite, the Girgashite, the Amorite, and the Jebusite. ¹¹ "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over ahead of you into the Jordan.

¹² "Now then, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man for each tribe. ¹³ "It shall come about when the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan will be cut off, and the waters which are flowing down from above will stand in one heap." ¹⁴ So when the people set out from their tents to cross the Jordan with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and when those who carried the ark came into the Jordan, and the feet of the priests carrying the ark were dipped in the edge of the water

(for the Jordan overflows all its banks all the days of harvest),¹⁶ the waters which were flowing down from above stood and rose up in one heap, a great distance away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan; and those which were flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. So the people crossed opposite Jericho.¹⁷ And 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 crossed on dry ground, until all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan.

This morning, as we think about this chapter from the Old Testament, please try to imagine with me that we are also standing on one side of a river and that we need to get across—not literally, but let us try to imagine some kind of spiritual obstacle we may be facing—some kind of challenge, or perhaps something we know that God wants us to do but that we are having a hard time doing. Maybe we need to repent of something. Maybe we need to step out in faith. Maybe you still need to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins. And so the question is: Do we settle down or do we cross over? I would like for us to put ourselves in the place of the Israelites, as we consider a basic plan of action for dealing with those challenges, based on the pattern that has been set for us here in **Joshua 3**. We know from **Romans 15:4** that the Old Testament was written for our instruction, and so the question is: What can we learn from their example?

I. As we go back to the very beginning of this chapter, we discover first of all that GOD WAS LEADING AND THAT THE ISRAELITES WERE TO KEEP THEIR EYES ON GOD.

In **verses 3-4**, the people are basically told to keep their eye on the Ark of the Covenant so that they would know which way to go, and when they Ark moved, they were to move, keeping a distance of about 3/5 of a mile. In other words, they were to keep their eyes on what God was doing. They were to be aware of God's movement. They were to keep their eyes focused on the Lord.

As we take just that one little fact and consider that it was the first thing they were told to do, let's apply that to our situation today. When we face any kind of struggle or any kind of challenge, it seems like it wouldn't be too bad to keep our eyes on the Lord also! In fact, so often it is easy to let our minds wander, to let ourselves drift along in a fog. So perhaps we need a reminder to snap out of it, to refocus, to keep our eyes on the Lord. Think about going to a strange place and having a tour guide. If we do not know where we are going, then we need to keep our eyes focused on that guide. The Lord is that guide.

In the book of **John**, John refers to Jesus as the "***Word***," the Word of God, and so it seems that if we want to look at the Lord today, if we want to see the Lord, then we need to focus on the Word. If we can see the Word, then we can see the Lord. Are we keeping ourselves focused on the Word of God? Are we keeping ourselves in it, as

we should? This reminder from the Old Testament is here for our instruction. The first step in overcoming any obstacle is to keep ourselves focused on the Lord.

II. As we go back to Joshua 3, we find another part of this process in verse 5 as we find that the people are told to CONSECRATE THEMSELVES FOR THE LORD.

The idea is that they are to prepare their hearts. The word literally refers to making something holy. It refers to setting something apart for a special reason. The word was used to refer to the special furniture and those utensils that were used in the tabernacle—they were to be consecrated. Remember: Those items had been made from the nose rings and earrings that the people had brought with them out of Egypt. But once those utensils were consecrated, they were not to be used for just anything. You could not borrow the altar to grill out on the weekend, but it was special, it was dedicated exclusively to God and could not be used in any other way. It was God's altar, not theirs. Those items were ceremonially clean. And so in a way, Joshua was telling them that they needed to clean up. They needed to remember how special they really were. They were to prepare their hearts. They were to set themselves aside for God.

In the New Testament, Peter gave a similar reminder to the early Christians as he described them as, ***"...A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION..." (1 Peter 3:9)***. In other words, they were special. The early Christians were consecrated. They were set apart for a reason. They were different. Of course, we know how easy it is to forget this sometimes. Other stuff seems to sneak into our lives. Maybe we get busy. Maybe start giving in to some kind of sin that no one else knows about. And before too long, we don't feel too special anymore. That's been going on for thousands of years, and so Joshua had to tell the people to consecrate themselves, to prepare their hearts before they could cross over the Jordan River. It was an important step in that process. Once they crossed over, they would be representing God in that new land. They were the ones through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. They were to keep their eyes on God and they were to get their hearts ready. Aren't we in the same situation today? We are representing God right here in the Madison area. We, then, must also prepare our hearts.

III. As we look back at Joshua 3, there is something else for us to consider when it comes to facing a spiritual challenge, and that is: The people were told to PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO GOD'S INSTRUCTIONS, even if what they were told to do did not make perfect sense at the time.

From a purely human point of view, there were so many things they perhaps should have tried. They could have waited for the dry season, for the waters to recede on their own. They could have sent some of the best swimmers across first with some ropes for the rest of the people to then use as a guide. They could have built some rafts or boats. They could have gone around the southern end of the Dead Sea.

They could have gone upstream where the river was smaller. But instead, God told the priests (starting in **verse 8**) to pick up the Ark of the Covenant, to start walking directly to the river, to walk out in the middle of the river, and then to just stand there. God told them that He would stop the water and that He would heap up the water somewhere upstream. And so instead of bridges, or ropes, or boats, or a detour, God decides to simply make the water go away! So, God has a plan, and He wants the people to pay special attention to the plan. We can almost imagine some of the priests scratching their heads a little bit on this one, **“Doesn’t God know that a gold covered box will not float? Doesn’t God know that water doesn’t heap?”** Or think about this from the point of view of the locals. From their point of view, these were some crazy people. Imagine living in that area and watching 2-3 million people march directly for the flood-swollen Jordan River. From their point of view, it did not make sense. From their point of view, it was a suicide mission.

The lesson for us today is that we cannot make our decisions based on what other people are saying. We cannot make every decision based on what the economy is doing. We cannot simply do what we think makes the most sense to us, but we are to pay special attention to the word of God. We cannot always even rely on what our parents are telling us to do. After all, these people’s parents had faced the same challenge more than 40 years earlier, and they had failed. And yet all of that heartache (the 40 years in the wilderness) could have been avoided if only they had followed the directions the first time.

As I was preparing this morning’s lesson, I ran across a story about a tourist who came up to a sign that said **“ROAD CLOSED. DO NOT ENTER.”** The road ahead looked good, so the man ignored the sign and kept on going. Several miles ahead, the man came to a bridge that had collapsed, and so he had to turn back. When he came back to that sign he had ignored, he discovered that someone had written on the back side of the sign, **“Welcome back, fool.”** Well, perhaps in a similar way, it is much easier to trust God’s word than to ignore it and pay the price later. So, we are to pay attention to God’s instructions.

IV. As we go back to our text for this morning, we find another step in this process of overcoming an obstacle, and that is: The people were basically told to REMEMBER GOD’S PROMISES.

In **verse 8**, God makes an interesting statement to Joshua privately as He reassures Joshua that, **“...just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you.”** In other words, there is some historical basis to what is about to happen! Haven’t the Israelites had some experience with crossing over large bodies of water? The previous generation had crossed over the Red Sea on dry ground, and the miracles are surprisingly similar. So, as I see it, God is telling Joshua to remember the past, **“...just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you.”** Not only that, but we also find in **verses 9-11** that once they cross over, they are to remove the inhabitants of the land. In other words, this was a reminder of God’s original promise to Abraham, the land promise that was made roughly 500 years before this. When in doubt: Remember God’s promises! And so today, when we are worried or nervous

about doing something that God has told us to do, we can also remember the Lord's promise. After telling the apostles to go preach the gospel all over the world, the Lord made the promise, ***"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"*** (**Matthew 28:20**). The Lord continues to be with us even today, and so there is no reason to be afraid.

V. As we come to the end of this chapter, there is obviously one more step, and that is: AT SOME POINT THE PEOPLE HAD TO ACTUALLY TAKE THAT FIRST STEP INTO THE WATER.

Remember: When Moses parted the Red Sea, he lifted up his staff, the Sea parted, and then the people walked across. But here, their faith was really put to the test. God told them to take that step into the water, and only then would the water dry up. Can you imagine being in that situation? Can we imagine leading 2-3 million people directly toward a raging flood-swollen river? Philip Varney can imagine that, but most of us cannot!. One thing I love about hiking to any waterfall is being able to hear it for the first time. As we get closer, we think we hear some background noise, but we're not sure—we think it might be the trees. But then as we get closer, the water gets louder, and then finally we are standing right there with the roar of the falls. Can we imagine what it must have been like for those priests to get closer and closer to the water and then to take that first step down into the water?

So often, we want God to just fix the problem. We want to wake up and have the situation just go away. But often, God is asking us to do something. Before the river dries up, we actually need to take a step down into the water. The priests take that step, and in **verse 16**, the Bible explains that, ***"...the waters which were flowing down from above stood and rose up in one heap, a great distance away at Adam."*** The maps tell us that Adam was 15-20 miles north! As I understand it, the priests must have stood to the side while the people crossed over downstream. If that is the case, then as the people crossed over, if they had looked over to the right (to the north), they would have seen the Ark of God holding back that giant pile of water.

Perhaps the greatest part of this miracle is that the people crossed over on ***"dry land"*** (we see this in **verse 17**). Not only did they make it across, but there were no muddy footprints going up the other side! We remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and how they were delivered from the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel. The Bible says in **Daniel 3:27** that when they were brought out of the fire, the king's officials discovered, ***"...that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them."*** In the same way, the children of Israel crossed over the rain-swollen Jordan River and did not even get their feet muddy! They took that first step and they were pleasing to God. As Jesus said under the New Covenant, in **John 14:15**, ***"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."***

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, we know that there are many Jordan Rivers that we may face in this life. Perhaps some of you here this morning are just trying to make it through middle or high school. Perhaps others are working through some marriage issues. Perhaps others are having trouble with children. Perhaps others are facing some serious health concerns, or retirement, or unemployment. Maybe you have a loved one going through some kind of stressful situation right now. A lot of us here today just want to make it through the next week. I don't know what you're going through, but God knows what it's like to stand there at the edge of a river.

- He wants His people to realize that He is the Leader.
- He wants His people to keep their hearts pure.
- He wants His people to pay attention to the instructions.
- He wants His people to remember His promises.
- And He wants His people to step into the water, doing whatever it takes to step out in faith.

Perhaps you are here this morning and know what you need to do, and maybe the next step for you is just a change of attitude. Maybe you need to work something out with a coworker tomorrow morning. Or maybe you need to apologize to one of your children. But for those who are not yet Christians, the Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin, that we must confess our belief in Jesus as God's Son, and that we must allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we would be glad to meet with you after the service, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, if you are ready to step down into the water, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org