

Joshua 3-5: Israel's Watershed Event

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In Joshua 3, the children of Israel were preparing for a watershed event, which was the crossing of the Jordan River into the "promised land". A watershed is a piece of land that causes a river to change its course, and a watershed event is one that causes a turning point and change in the history of Israel. In this case the watershed was the power of God in holding back the river so that the nation of people could cross over and begin a new life. The transition was to be a new nation in a new land, and they were going from tents to permanent houses. Manna would cease, and the pillar of cloud would no longer guide them. They had a new leader in Joshua, but first they must conduct a holy war on the Canaanites. But the problem remained of how could 2-3 million people cross a major river while it was in flood stage? God gave them a promise that as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant touched the water, the waters of the Jordan River would be cut off and be dammed up so that the people could cross on dry ground.

Preparation for Crossing

In order to prepare for the crossing, the people were ordered to move up to the Jordan River from Shittim. In Joshua 3:1-4, they stayed on the east bank for three days while the leaders came through the camp giving instructions. The pillar of cloud with God's glory, which they had followed for 40 years would no longer lead them, but now they would follow the Ark of the Covenant being carried by the priests. The people had to keep their distance by 2000 cubits (3000 feet) because of the holiness of God associated with the Ark.

In Joshua 3:5-13, the people would consecrate themselves, which was their spiritual cleansing and preparation for God's great miracle of holding back the waters. The Lord spoke to Joshua and told him that the miracle would solidify Joshua as their new leader. Joshua would tell the priests to carry the Ark into the Jordan River and stand still. Then all the people would see the great miracle from the distance, and they would know that God was with them and doing this for them. The miracle would certify that God was in Israel's midst and He would drive out the 7 tribes of Canaanites and give the land to Israel. The theological justification for the expulsion of the Canaanites was that God has dominion over the earth that He created, and His presence with Israel proved He was giving the Land to them.

The Crossing

Israel's part in this great watershed event was to show up and exercise faith by stepping into the river. That sounds easy but we are told in v.14-15 that the timing was in April, the time of the harvest when the river was in its flood stage. Melting snow from Mt. Herman flowing down from the north, along with Spring rains would cause the river to be about a mile wide and flowing at a great rate. The defiant river was daring Israel to cross at its own peril. I'm sure the enemy forces watching from the west side of the river felt safe because of the natural barrier of the river protecting them. In Joshua 3:15-17, the priests carrying the Ark stepped into the river, and immediately the water from upstream stopped flowing near the town of Adam just south of the junction of the Jabbock River. This means that the stretch of dry ground would have been about 15 miles long. The Canaanites no doubt thought the flooded river would be an impenetrable barrier for 2-3 million people to cross, so you can imagine the fear of God that was put into them that day. The result was that God was glorified, Joshua was established, Israel was encouraged, and Jericho was terrified.

The Ark of the Covenant

There is a great emphasis in Joshua 3-4 on the people fixing their eyes on the Ark as a symbol of the presence of God. This is mentioned about 21 times in ch.3-5. Normally when people have to cross a raging river they focus on the river, just as we also tend to focus on our circumstances and problems. God desires that His people focus on Him and trust Him in these situations. During the three days they were camped on the east side they had to take full stock of the formidable barrier, and come to grips with their helplessness. By focusing on the Ark as the presence of God, they would be acting in faith and see this watershed event as God delivering them into the land. God had delivered them out of Egypt, and now He was delivering them

into the "promised land". What was the Ark exactly? In Exodus 25:10-22, God gave instructions to build a rectangular box of wood about 3'9" by 2'3" by 2'3". It was to be overlaid in gold inside and out, so the appearance was pure gold. They put four gold rings on the side so poles could go through to carry it. Inside the box they put the 10 Commandments that God gave them. The Ark was the container of the written expression of the moral character of God. We also learn from Hebrews 9:4 that they put Aaron's rod and a jar of manna inside the box. On the outside top of the box they built a gold mercy seat (the covering lid of the box), and on it two cherubim (angels) made out of gold. The Ark symbolized the presence of God, and God's glory would reside above the mercy seat. In Exodus 26:33, we learn that the Ark would be placed in the "Most Holy Place" in the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a tent that was packed up and travelled with Israel during the 40 years of wilderness wandering, and rebuilt at every new location they camped at, and the Levite priests would carry the Ark on poles until it was put back in the rebuilt tent at every new location. In Joshua 3-5, the importance of the Ark was that when the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River, God Himself went before them.

Joshua 4—the Memorial

The second major event associated with the crossing of the Jordan River was the taking of 12 large stones out of the river to be erected on the west bank. These stones would serve as a memorial to Israel of God's great miracle in enabling them to cross as a nation into their newly given land. The people always needed a memorial because like all of us they tended to forget the awesome things God had done for them. Moses said it well in Deut.8 that when they got comfortable in their houses and their land was productive, they would forget that it was God who had given it all to them, and not their own strength and wisdom. Joshua 4 gives three specific reasons why they need a memorial. First the initial generation needed it because the battles ahead would be hard and they might get discouraged. By returning to the memorial they could be reminded that God was with them. Secondly, the next generation would need a memorial so that the new children of successive generations could be told the story. Verse 6-7 says that when their future children asked what these stones mean, the parents can explain how God held up the waters of the Jordan so the whole nation could cross over. The third reason is given in v.24 that it would be a testimony to all the foreign nations of the power of God, and they would fear the God of Israel.

Joshua 5—First Things First

Now that Israel had crossed the Jordan River, readers expect an immediate attack on Jericho, but first, two strange but crucial preparations must precede it. God commanded that all the males be circumcised, and that all the people celebrate Passover. Joshua 5:1 tells us that every Canaanite in Jericho (and also all over Canaan) heard how God had dried up the river and Israel had crossed over---they were terrified, and therefore ripe for the picking, but they had to do first things first.. Also, imagine the danger of incapacitating your entire army by circumcising them. From all evidence I can uncover, an adult male needs about a week to recover from circumcision, and it makes me shudder to even think about using "flint knives". I'll try not to even think about that again. Apparently a fresh start was necessary that they be in full obedience to the covenant the nation of Israel made with God at Mt. Sinai. In v.4-7, we are given an explanation that all the circumcised males had died in the wilderness, and those disobedient rebels had failed to circumcise their sons born in the wilderness. They had also failed to observe the Passover memorial commanded from Exodus 12 and Lev.23:5-6.

After the circumcisions, in v.9 God said "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt". While they had been slaves in Egypt, they had not been allowed to be circumcised, they had been involved in idolatry, and the Egyptians had taunted them for not having their own homeland. The rite of circumcision for Abraham's descendants was initiated by God to Abraham in Genesis 17:11. It was no ordinary religious rite, but was the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants that God would give them the land of Canaan. Therefore God was saying "Before I fight your battles and give you the land, you must have the sign of our covenant guaranteeing it. In Joshua 5:10, Israel celebrated only its third Passover. The first was in Egypt when the angel of death "passed over" their houses (Ex.12), and the second was at Mt. Sinai just before they broke camp to go to Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 9:1-5). Imagine these two ordinances were not followed by the disobedient generation who wandered in the wilderness for forty years even though God had miraculously freed them from slavery and led them out of Egypt. Amazingly, when the people came into Canaan during the harvest there was an abundance of grain and food to eat, and it was just then that God stopped providing the manna that He provided since Ex. 16. It was not all a matter of chance but of God's providence.

Joshua 5:13-15, Preparation for Conquest

After the great experiences of the people crossing the river, being circumcised, celebrating Passover, and eating the produce

of the new land, God would give Joshua individually a meaningful experience. Also, he had received no revelation yet about how to take Jericho—a fortified city with formidable walls. They had no siege engines, no catapults, no battering rams, and no towers. What were they supposed to attack with, flint knives? Joshua was checking out Jericho when he looked up to see a mysterious soldier with a sword. Joshua challenged him, “Are you for us or our adversaries?” The soldier had a surprising answer. Like us, Joshua just assumes that God is on his side, but the real question is “Are we on God’s side?” Therefore the soldier who turned out to be the commander of the “army of the Lord” said “Neither, I am the captain of the army of the Lord”. This was Joshua’s “burning bush” experience, and the captain would now give Joshua his unique battle plan that in the end would prove that God had fought and won the battle of Jericho.

Applications

What is true of Israel’s transition in Joshua that is also true of our experience? I can think of at least six principles:

1. Circumstances change but God’s absolute truth never changes
2. We must step out in faith and cross the river
3. We must be strong and courageous
4. We can know the ending based on God’s promises
5. Our inclination is pride and self reliance, but our need is humility and dependence
6. We need memorials to remember what God has done

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