

## Lesson 4

# Crossing the Jordan

## *Joshua 3-4.18*

### Introduction

After the spies returned to camp and delivered their report, it was time for Israel to move forward toward the goal. The time of taking possession of the land was at hand and Joshua moves without delay. It was around a six-mile journey from Acacia Grove to the east bank of the Jordan. After arriving, the people lodged there for three days. They would have had plenty of time to observe the swollen river, at flood stage, filled with the spring runoff. No suggestion was made in advance as to how they were going to get across the river, hardening the reality in their mind that the only way would be by the help of the Lord.

As mentioned in a previous lesson, crossing the Jordan was always a formidable task regardless of the water level.

The river Jordan had a separating rather than a connecting function, running through a deep gorge which may be called the earth's deepest valley. The Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, which lies 1286 feet below sea level. The river runs through a wider trough called the Ghor, within which is a narrower depression of one hundred feet or more in depth, forming the actual river bottom. In addition to these forbidding features the absolute level of the river valley is greatly enhanced by the mountains on both sides. The slopes are generally steep and sudden, sometimes forming huge precipices.<sup>13</sup>

### Instructions Received

#### *3.2-5: Instructions for the People*

The people were told by their tribal leaders to follow the Levites when they would depart carrying the Ark of the Covenant. They were to maintain their distance (around a half a mile), so they would know where to go *for you haven't traveled this way before*, Joshua 3.4. Again, nothing has been said about the way they will cross an impossible barrier. They are simply expected to follow the Lord's command in faith. The span of 2000 cubits roughly equates to the distance from the outer banks of the Jordan River to its inner riverbed. Remaining back at this distance meant that while the Israelites remained on the river's outer bank, the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant would be approaching the very brink of the water. As the Israelites observed the Ark of the Covenant being carried towards the Jordan, it would signal to them the path they were to follow. This route to the river was not a conventional crossing point and was unfamiliar to the people, suggesting an extraordinary event was about to unfold.

Next, in 3.5, Joshua addresses the people, who he instructs to *consecrate* themselves. This was usually done through external acts (such as the washing of clothes, Exodus 19.10, 14-15; Numbers 11.18) to stimulate the mind to readiness for engaging with God in worship or observing His acts. Joshua said these things would happen on the next day.

## ***On the Next Day***

Verses 6-17 is *the next day*. How the story is told in the following verses is not in chronological order.

### **Instructions for Joshua**

First, God speaks to Joshua and reassures him, saying that what would happen that day would exalt him in the sight of the entire nation, 6.7. God wants to reinforce the fact that Joshua is the chosen successor to Moses and that what had been promised to Moses would now be fulfilled. He was told to instruct the priests to head out toward the Jordan and stand in it, 6.8.

### **Instructions for the Priests**

They are told by Joshua to go on ahead of the people toward the Jordan, 6.6. As they do, the people are breaking camp and getting ready to go, 6.14.

### **Instructions for the People**

As the priests head off into the distance, Joshua gathers the people and addresses them. What will happen that day will enable them *to know* that a living God is among them. The people will gain a clear understanding through experience that a dynamic, living God is present among them. They are going to personally witness His vitality and ability to act—setting Him apart from the inert gods of other nations, which are often depicted as powerless and unable to rescue, Psalm 96.5; 115.3–7. In contrast, the presence of the living God with Israel signifies His active engagement in the lives of His people, Deuteronomy 6.15.

The people would come to understand that this *living God* would *certainly* drive out before them all the present inhabitants of the land of Canaan. Their success was going to be undergirded by His power and might, upon which they would be completely dependent.

Next, Joshua commands the selection of twelve men, one man from each tribe is chosen, to follow the priests. At the exact moment their feet touch the waters of the swollen river, the waters of the river will be cut off and stop flowing to the south. *The water flowing downstream will stand up in a mass*, 3.13b. It is very important to stress it is the faith exercised by the carriers and followers of the ark that is the true catalyst for the miracle.

## **3.15-17: The Crossing**

At the very instant the feet of the priests touched the river water, the current stood still. It is thought that the city of Adam is the modern city of *Damiyeh*, around 19 miles upstream from where the crossing took place. The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan until all the people had finished crossing the river. To comprehend the remarkable halting of the Jordan River described here, one must consider the geographical conditions of the area. Typically, the Jordan is bordered by a narrow strip of land on both sides where the waters gently lap the edges. However, during the flood season, the river's boundaries can dramatically expand, sometimes extending up to a mile wide, with surging currents and a multitude of floating debris and submerged hazards creating a perilous crossing. This scenario might be difficult to envision for those of us in modern times, given that the

Jordan's flow is now significantly diminished due to the extensive extraction of its waters for agricultural use.

There are questions as to how to translate the exact location of *where* the waters backed up. Depending on the Bible translation, *from Adam* can also be translated *at Adam*. Assuming "from Adam" is the proper interpretation, the narrative suggests that the waters of the Jordan were heaped up over the entire span from the region of Adam to the location of the crossing. One writer suggests the ensuing flood affected 29% of the Jordan River Valley.<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, if we accept the other interpretation, it implies that the waters ceased and accumulated at a location beyond the Israelites' line of sight. This would have created an extensive area of dry riverbed, providing ample space for the Israelites to cross.<sup>15</sup>

### **4.1-9: A Memorial is Constructed**

Once the nation is gathered safely on the west side of the river, God comes to Joshua and instructs him to gather the twelve men he had selected from the Israelites (3.12) and have them each carry a stone from the middle of the Jordan and carry them to the new campsite of the people where they would be gathered as a monument of remembrance. The stones would serve to create curiosity among coming generations and provide an opportunity for adults to recount to the children the extraordinary deed of divine loyalty that God executed for them on the day they crossed the river.

The intended remembrance goes far beyond the mere act of recalling a miraculous event. It is to be understood as a testament to the steadfastness of the divine covenant. Emphasizing the cessation of the waters underscores the event's profound impact. In Hebrew tradition, to remember is not simply to bring to mind. It is an act of mindful consideration, a meditative engagement that may prompt appropriate action. This concept is exemplified in Jeremiah 2.6–7, which addresses Israel's failure in this respect. The memorial is designed for all Israelites, irrespective of whether they reside west or east of the Jordan.

Verse 9 introduces additional stones that Joshua placed directly within the Jordan River. Given the repeated emphasis on the ark's significance during the crossing, it is fitting, though unexpected for the reader, that the precise location where the priests stood with the ark would be marked by a memorial. The author notes that these stones remained there "to this day," a phrase typically associated with affirming the truthfulness of the narrative. These stones would likely have been visible during periods when the water level of the Jordan was low.

### **4.10-18: After the Crossing**

The story's climax in 4.10-11, detailing the completion of the crossing, places a strong emphasis on the collective obedience of all parties involved. Joshua, who had been a diligent servant, executed all that the Lord had commanded him, both through the legacy of Moses' teachings and through direct divine discourse. Similarly, the priests followed Joshua's directives to the letter, and the people swiftly crossed the now dry riverbed, demonstrating their cooperation and haste.

As the monumental event ended, the ark of the Covenant once again took its place at the forefront of the procession. 4.12-13 provides details on how the Transjordan troops, a formidable group of forty

thousand, marched in step behind the ark. Their adherence to Moses' original commands is reiterated, underscoring their disciplined commitment to the mission. On that day, Yahweh fulfilled His promise to elevate Joshua's stature among the Israelites, 4.14. The people's respect for Joshua soared, mirroring the honor they had held for Moses, cementing Joshua's authority and leadership for the remainder of his life.

The account of the ark's emergence from the Jordan is presented with as much emphasis as its entrance into the river. Acting on Joshua's order, which in turn was a response to God's command, the priests vacated the riverbed. In a moment that mirrored the awe of their entrance, the instant their feet settled on the western shore, the river was unleashed, resuming its natural course with a torrential surge. The waters, once held at bay, now flooded the banks as they had done previously. The precision of the water's return to its full depth was no less miraculous than the earlier parting that had allowed the Israelites safe passage just hours before, 4.15-18.

This entire sequence, from the initial crossing to the closing of the waters, stands as a testament to the power of obedience, the faithfulness of divine promises, and the miraculous providence that accompanies adherence to divine will. It serves as a powerful example of divine orchestration, where human obedience aligns with God's miraculous acts, producing a historical and spiritual milestone for the Israelite nation.

## What's In This for Us?

**Trust in God:** Just as the Israelites faced the impassable Jordan River, we too face obstacles in our lives that seem insurmountable. The lesson teaches us to trust in God's provision even when we cannot see a way forward. Just as the priests had to step into the river before it parted, we too may need to take steps of faith before we see God's power manifest in our situations.

**Obedience to God's Commands:** The story emphasizes the importance of obedience. Even when God's commands seem challenging or His plans unclear, obedience is crucial for His blessings to unfold in our lives.

**Remember and Testify:** The stones served as a memorial for future generations. We should remember the great things God has done in our lives and be ready to share these testimonies with others, especially the younger generation. When the Israelites successfully crossed the Jordan, it was clear that it was God who had made it possible. Similarly, we should give God the glory for the successes and breakthroughs in our lives.

## Conclusion

Israel's crossing of the Jordan stands as an amazing demonstration of faith, obedience, and divine intervention. From the preparation at Acacia Grove to the miraculous passage through the swollen waters of the Jordan, here we see the Israelites' unwavering commitment to God's command and the powerful leadership of Joshua.

Think of how the nation was poised on the brink of the Jordan, contemplating the formidable natural barrier before them. Yet, the absence of a disclosed plan for crossing the river served only to underscore

their complete dependence on the Lord for deliverance—a theme that is repeated throughout the story. The people's obedience in following at a prescribed distance speaks to their reverence and readiness for what God is about to do.

This story, with its emphasis on collective obedience and the visible presence of the living God, becomes a source of inspiration and learning for us. It calls us to step out in faith, even when the way is not clear, trusting that God will make a way where there seems to be no way. It beckons us to consecrate ourselves, to prepare for the work God has called us to, and to remember His deeds with a heart of action and gratitude. As the Israelites honored Joshua, we too are reminded to respect and follow godly leadership, recognizing that through such obedience, God's purposes are fulfilled.

## For Class Interaction and Discussion

### ***Brief Outline of the Lesson:***

#### 1. Introduction

- Review of the spies' report and the call to move forward.
- Journey from Acacia Grove to the Jordan and the anticipation of crossing.

#### 2. Observing the Jordan

- Description of the Jordan River and its natural barriers.
- Reflection on the need for divine intervention.

#### 3. Instructions Received

- The command to follow the Ark at a distance.
- The act of consecration in preparation for what God will do.

#### 4. The Miracle of Crossing

- The priests' steps into the Jordan and the halting of the waters.
- The crossing on dry ground and the return of the river's flow.

#### 5. The Memorial Construction

- The significance of the twelve stones.
- The importance of remembering and recounting God's deeds.

#### 6. After the Crossing

- The obedience of all parties and the exaltation of Joshua.
- The acknowledgment of God's power and promise.

### ***Thought Questions for Discussion***

1. How does the journey to the Jordan reflect moments of anticipation in our own spiritual walk?
2. What can the natural features of the Jordan teach us about the obstacles we face in life?
3. Why was it significant for the people to follow the Ark at a specific distance, and how does this relate to our understanding of reverence?
4. In what ways do we consecrate ourselves today in preparation for God's work in our lives?

5. How can stepping out in faith, like the priests entering the Jordan, be applied to our current life situations?
6. Discuss the importance of communal obedience to God's commands as shown by the Israelites.
7. Why is it important to create memorials, physical or otherwise, of God's faithfulness?
8. How can the story of the crossing of the Jordan inspire confidence in God's leadership through our own 'Joshuas'?
9. What does this story teach us about God's timing and providence?
10. How can we ensure that God receives the glory for the victories in our personal lives?

### **Group Activities:**

1. **River of Stones:** Have each person write a significant moment of God's faithfulness in their life on a stone and place it in a "river" made of fabric. Share stories and reflect on God's provision.
2. **Reflect:** Have a time of prayer and reflection where each person considers what they need to lay down or consecrate before God in anticipation of what He is about to do in their lives.

### **Final Encouraging Word:**

As we reflect upon the crossing of the Jordan, let us be encouraged by Israel's example of obedience and faith. Just as the Israelites stood before the Jordan, we too stand before the rivers in our lives that seem uncrossable. Let us consecrate ourselves, prepare in faith, and follow the Lord with full assurance that He will part the waters before us. May we remember the stones of remembrance and recount the great deeds of the Lord, for He is the same God who parts our rivers and leads us into our promised inheritance. Let us move forward, not by sight but by faith, trusting in the God who is ever with us.

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<sup>13</sup>Woudstra, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup>Hess, p. 116.

<sup>15</sup>Most modern word-for-word and thought-for-thought translations use "at Adam," with the CSB and Lexham English Bibles being the exception.