

This morning I am in the third week of a sermon series I am doing on the Old Testament book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible. If you're unfamiliar with this book of the Bible, the historical context is that the Israelites, who were enslaved in Egypt, have been set free by God, using a man named Moses, with the plan of bringing them to the land of Canaan, a land which God had promised to their ancestor Abraham 600 years earlier. Unfortunately, when Moses sent people to spy out the land, 10 of the 12 spies came back saying that there was no way they could defeat the inhabitants of the land, while only 2 of the spies – Joshua and Caleb – encouraged them that if God had promised them the land, then He would make a way for them to enter it. Unfortunately, the negative report of the 10 spies caused fear to spread throughout the camp. As a result of their fear and disobedience, God caused the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until that generation, except for Joshua and Caleb, would die out. In the beginning of the book of Joshua, the 40 years of wandering has passed, Moses has died, and they are once again on the border of the promised land. This morning, we are going to read through chapters 3-4, which detail the crossing of the Jordan River and entrance into the promised land, and see what we learn about knowing and following God.

Joshua 3:1 - 4:24 - *Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. ² After three days the officers went throughout the camp, ³ giving orders to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. ⁴ Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it."*

What is the ark of the covenant? Instructions in Exodus 25. Rectangular chest of acacia wood, gold-plated, capped with two outstretched winged cherubim facing one another. Under those wings was the mercy seat. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifices there for the propitiation and expiation of sins. It contains the 10 commandments on two tablets, Aaron's rod, and a bowl of manna. Most importantly, the ark of God symbolized the presence of God for the Israelites. It went before them in battle, and in peacetime it was where Moses would meet with God:

Exodus 25:22 - *There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.*

Let's continue reading:

⁵ Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you." ⁶ 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. ⁷ And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses." ⁸ Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: 'When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.'" ⁹ Joshua said to the Israelites, "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God." ¹⁰ This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. ¹¹ See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. ¹² Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³ And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the LORD-- the Lord of all the earth-- set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap." ¹⁴ So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

God instructs the priests to take the ark and to set foot in the Jordan River. When they do, the river stops so that the whole nation of Israel can cross through to the other side. The author makes the point of mentioning that it was at flood stage, just to highlight just how miraculous this was. Not only is God showing His covenant faithfulness to them, but He is showing that He is with Joshua just as He was with Moses, who was a part of the parting of the Red Sea when they escaped from Egypt.

^{NIV} **Joshua 4:1** - When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³ and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them

down at the place where you stay tonight." ⁴ So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of **the tribes of the Israelites**, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." ⁸ So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, **where they put them down**. ⁹ 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.

Notice that the author puts "and they are there to this day" in on occasion, which helps us trust the veracity of this account, since the readers of this account could check on this.

¹⁰ Now the priests who carried the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything the LORD had commanded Joshua was done by the people, just as Moses had directed Joshua. The people hurried over, ¹¹ and as soon as all of them had crossed, the ark of the LORD and the priests came to the other side while the people watched. ¹² The men of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over, armed, in front of the Israelites, as Moses had directed them. ¹³ About forty thousand armed for battle crossed over before the LORD to the plains of Jericho for war. ¹⁴ That day the LORD exalted Joshua **in the sight of all Israel**; and they revered him all the days of his life, just as they had revered Moses. ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Joshua, ¹⁶ "Command the priests carrying 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 the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before. ¹⁹ On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. ²⁰ And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had **taken out of the Jordan**. ²¹ He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' ²² tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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."

God gives them instructions on how to cross the river. As the priests enter the river with the ark, the river backs up. The nation crosses. And God gives them instruction to have each tribe take a stone to build a monument of twelve stones as a reminder of what God has done, so that they would always know that God is powerful and they would fear the Lord, a phrase means to have a healthy reverence and respect God, not to live afraid.

I want to talk about three things from this passage that I think are essential to living the life of faith:

1) God gives many promises, but we must take hold of them

In the story, God leads the Israelites to the land of Canaan, a land that He has promised to them many times over. But the people still need to actually do something in order to possess the land. Just because it has been promised does not mean it is automatically theirs if they are not willing to take hold of it through an act of faith. In fact, 40 years earlier, it was precisely their lack of belief that caused them to NOT possess the land and for the entire generation except for Joshua and Caleb to die out in the wilderness. God promises, but it is up to the people to take hold of those promises by faith. And faith is more than just believing it to be true; it is an active faith. **Just look at what God asks of them (slide): the priests must step into the Jordan River before God will part the sea. If they believe intellectually that God can part the river but refuse to actually step into the river, they will never experience God coming through on His promises.**

This is a crucial distinction for you to understand in your discipleship. Yes, God has given many promises to you, but they are not going to be experienced passively, by just sitting back and waiting for God to fulfill them. Most of the promises that God gives require some kind of act of faith in order to activate them. Consider:

***John 3:16** - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

***Matt 6:31-33** - So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and*

your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Phil 4:6-7 - *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Rom 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

1 John 1:9 - *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Isa 40:31 - *but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

God has so many promises, but they are not given passively. They are activated by an act of faith: hope in the Lord. Confess your sins. Love Him. Present your requests to God. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Believe in Him.

The command to the Joshua and the priests is this: step by faith into the Jordan River, even while it is still raging, and you will see the power of God. But if you are too afraid to step in, if you don't trust that God can stop the water, then God will not part the river, and you will never enter the promised land. The same reality held for the previous generation: if the inhabitants of the land seem like giants to you and you shrink back in fear, you will not enter the promised land. Even though it has been promised to you, you must take hold of it by an act of faith.

Are you hearing me? Do you understand what this is saying? If you feel like God is absent, or if you feel stagnant in your faith, do not ask "where is God?" Do not question His reality. He has given you so many promises, and His power and presence are only an act of faith away. Pray! Fast! Give! Love! Serve! Take hold of his promises by faith and you will see the power of God in your life!

2) Find ways of commemorating what God has done

So God tells the priests to step into the river with the ark, and when they do, the river backs up so that they can cross over on dry ground. But God is not done with

them. He tells them to select a man from each of the twelve tribes, to have each man take a stone from the middle of the riverbed, to carry it to the other side, and to erect a memorial that will be a reminder to future generations of the power of God on their behalf (slide). And they will need this reminder, for they are about to enter into battles with some other nations. They need to remember that God parted the raging river, so that they will be encouraged that He is also capable of winning the battles, even when they seem just as impossible. And so God has them set up stones of remembrance, so that they and the generations that come after them will remember what He has done.

Setting up stones of remembrance happens often in the Old Testament. We see something similar in 1 Samuel 7:12, after God delivers them from the attacking Philistine army:

1 Samuel 7:12 - Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us."

Ebenezer is a stone of remembrance: "thus far has the Lord helped us." If you have ever heard the hymn "Come thou fount of every blessing," the second verse begins with "Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I've come."

Find ways of commemorating what God has done. How do you do this in your life? Journal. Pictures. Memorials. Tell stories. God has come through on a great promise, won some major victory in your life. How will you memorialize it, so that when you look at it, you will be reminded of the goodness of God, so that when others see it, you can tell them about the provision of God?

3) The crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land points us to the gospel

As I mentioned earlier, the ark was a symbol of the presence of God. He dwelt symbolically between the cherubim above the ark, meeting with His people and going before them in battle. As the Israelites had traveled for 40 years, the ark had been at the center of the camp, but now it goes ahead of them to enter the Jordan River, to hold back the river that would kill them so that they could pass safely through to the promised land. To every Israelite who crossed, they would have seen a striking visual of God delivering them from death so that they might find the blessing and rest of the promised land.

The promised land represents God's blessing for His people and rest from wandering,

Joshua 1:13 - *"Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: 'The LORD your God is giving you rest and has granted you this land.'*

But as you will find out, the promised land never really becomes a place of rest for the Israelites, as their continued disobedience and rebellion leads them into many troubles. And in the end, Israel will be exiled from the land by God Himself because of their sin. But the truth is that God's promise was not really about a narrow strip of land in the middle east. God's promise of rest and land was much more than that, and the promised land points us ahead to the worldwide kingdom of God.

Hebrews 11:11-16 - *By faith Abraham, even though he was past age-- and Sarah herself was barren-- was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a **country of their own**. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

The Israelites will enter the promised land, but they will not find the rest or paradise they had hoped for. Because in the end, it's not about the land but about the heavenly promised land, the new heavens and the new earth. And just as the ark of the covenant held back the waves of death so that the people of God could cross over to the promised land, Jesus, God in human form, held back death so that we could enter that heavenly promised land.

Hebrews 2:9, 14-15 - *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

It is only by the power of God that we escape death and find salvation, eternal life, and true rest for our souls. that we enter the promised land, that we possess eternal life. Let us take hold of that promise by faith. And let us find ways to always commemorate and remember God's salvation and power in our lives.