



THE CROSSING

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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Joshua 3:1-17

Fifth Message

John Hanneman

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Every one of us has to make significant crossings in life, times when we enter a new dimension of being, living and relating. We enter some of these changes gladly, but we have to be forced, kicking and screaming, into others.

We make an early crossing when we leave elementary school for junior high school. From there we cross to high school, and at last to college. After graduation, we leave the world of education and enter the job market. Leaving the singles world and getting married is a very significant crossing; and from there we make the crossing that leads to bearing children and raising a family. When we move from one company to another or to one city to another, we cross over into different surroundings and circumstances. When we lose a parent, a spouse or a child, we cross over into a season of mourning and loss. At some point, of course, we must all face the prospect of our own death, crossing over from this life to the world that lies beyond. These crossings can be fearful times, because we do not know what lies ahead.

The most significant crossing in life comes in the spiritual realm, when we leave the natural world and cross over into the supernatural world. We leave a life of sin and enter into a life of holiness. We leave a life of selfishness and enter into a life of service. We leave the darkness of the world and enter into the light of heaven. We leave a life of being dead in our trespasses and sins and enter into the life of Christ.

Chapter 3 of Joshua recounts a most significant crossing for the nation of Israel, a physical crossing that had deep spiritual implications for them. In fact, the word "cross" occurs twenty-two times in chapters 3 and 4 of Joshua. Forty years earlier, Israel had left Egypt only to wander in the wilderness for a generation. Now at last, the nation was about to cross over from the wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey, the gift that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To accomplish this, the entire nation had to cross from one side of the Jordan to the other, a task of immense proportions.

Chapter 3 of Joshua, to which we come this morning, relates how this crossing was accomplished. We will read the text, make some comments on it, and then draw some spiritual applications from it. Verse 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 (NASB).

Shittim was the place where Israel was camped when the spies were sent out from the camp. They returned and gave the report, "Surely the LORD has given all the land into our hands, and all the inhabitants of the land, moreover, have melted away before us." Joshua responded immediately to this report. He "rose early in the morning" and brought the sons of Israel to the banks of the Jordan river.

Verses 2-4:

And it came about at the end of three days that the officers went through the midst of the camp; 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. 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."

The nation passed three days at edge of the Jordan. The time was early in April, approximately the same time of year that Moses led the people across the Red Sea, and the river was swollen. As the nation waited, God impressed upon them the impossibility of the task ahead. They, of course, were wondering how in the world could such a vast number of people cross over the Jordan.

In verse 3, the ark of the covenant is mentioned for the first time in Joshua. The ark, which will play a central role in these chapters, was a gold plated box, four feet by two feet by two feet, which housed the tablets of the commandments. It was a symbol of the presence of God. Later, it would be taken into battle so that Israel would know that God was with his people.

They were instructed to follow the ark, which was to be carried by the Levites, but at a distance of about two thousand cubits (about a thousand yards). God was making it clear that he was leading the nation; he wanted everyone to see that. The total total number of people who gathered to cross has been estimated at about two million. The census listed the number of men twenty years and older alone at more than six hundred thousand.

Now, before they set out, Joshua addresses the people and the priests. Verses 5-6:

Then Joshua said to the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.” 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.

Joshua commands the people to “consecrate themselves.” The word means to sanctify, to make holy. This would have involved such things as washing clothes (Exod. 19:10) and abstaining from sex (Exod. 19:15). Purity was a requirement before they entered into the land.

The reason for this was that they had to prepare their hearts for the wonders, or wonderful things, which God would do in their sight. “Wonders” refers to miracles like the ones God performed on Israel’s behalf in Egypt. These are acts that are beyond man’s capabilities, and hence, unsolvable or inaccessible to man. God’s wonderful acts are beyond man’s capacity to duplicate or fully understand. In the Psalms, the wonders of God are subjects for praise and thanksgiving. They are to be declared and revered—and not just in a private musing, but in a public sharing of what God has done.

Spiritual preparation was required before God would act; and purity was necessary to fully appreciate the wonders that only God could do. Israel was about to witness a holy moment.

Now the Lord speaks to Joshua. Verses 7-8:

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. 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.’”

God tells Joshua that he will be exalted just like Moses, and reaffirms to him that he will be with him, just as he was with Moses. So both Moses and Joshua shared the experience of leading the nation of Israel across a body of water in a miraculous way. Finally, God gives instructions for the priests to stand in the Jordan while the entire nation crosses over into the land.

Next, Joshua speaks to the sons of Israel. Verses 9-13:

Then Joshua said to the sons of Israel, “Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God.” And 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. Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over ahead of you into the Jordan. Now then, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man for each tribe. And 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, shall rest in the wa-

ters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, and the waters which are flowing down from above shall stand in one heap.”

Joshua tells the people what will happen before the fact, saying that when the very soles of the priests’ feet touch the water, the water would stand in “one heap.” This wonder would occur for two reasons. First, so that the people of Israel would know that the Living God, the God of all the earth, was with them. (These phrases describing the sovereign God stand in contrast to the local pagan dieties who died and came to life again with the changing of the seasons.) And second, the parting of the Jordan would encourage the people’s faith; it would be an indication that their God would dispossess all the enemies in the land to which they were now crossing over. Seven nations are listed, a number indicating completeness, so it would be a complete conquest. And it would be God, not Israel, who would dispossess these nations.

Twelve men, one for each tribe, are commissioned to carry stones into the Jordan to provide a firm footing in the muddy river for the priests carrying the ark. The fact that the water would stand in “one heap” would show that God and not some natural cause was responsible for the waters being cut off.

Finally, after all the years of wandering, the people begin crossing the Jordan. Verses 14-17:

So it came about when the people set out from their tents to cross the Jordan with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant before the people, 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), that 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. 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.

As the people obediently approach the river, the priests dip their own feet in the water. The only thing that was required was faith. Immediately, the river was cut off at Adam, a city about seventeen miles upstream from Jericho. Thus, a wide stretch of the river bottom was exposed so that the whole nation could cross. The waters flowing into the Dead Sea, probably tributaries which emptied into the river between Adam and the Dead Sea, were also cut off. The ark of the covenant was stationed in the middle of the river bed until the entire nation crossed over so that every person could see the ark as they crossed. The fact that landslides dammed the Jordan river in 1267 and in 1906, and that an earth-

quake on July 11, 1927 dammed the meandering stream for almost twenty-four hours, gives credibility to this account. Nonetheless, what happened here on this occasion of Israel's crossing was a wonder of God.

Now that we have read the story, I want to draw four spiritual applications for our lives from this amazing account. The first thing I will say is this: The greatest wonder of God is our salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we have already seen, for Christians, Israel's entering into the land represents our entering into our life in Christ. And crossing the Jordan is a picture of our salvation and baptism into this new life that is ours by faith. We leave behind Egypt and the wilderness, the world system, a life based on money, power and success, a life of chaos and sin, and we cross through the water and are united into the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The thing that the text highlights so beautifully is that we cannot cross over into this salvation unless God does a miracle, a wonder. Certainly we cannot cross over through our own efforts. We can't take ourselves out of death and into life. There is no bridge, no boat. God leads us to the edge of the water, and then he makes it possible for us to cross. The only thing we contribute is a small amount of faith: We put the soles of our feet in the water; God does all the rest. If we talk about what we have done to make our life in God possible, or try to explain what makes it feasible, we diminish God's wonder, because it is not fully accessible; it is beyond our reach. God wants us to watch, to marvel and participate.

The supreme wonder that makes our salvation possible is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just like Israel waited years to cross into the land, so the world had waited for a Messiah. Just as Israel waited three days at the banks of the Jordan, so the world waited three days for the resurrection of Jesus. The question was, would there be a way of salvation? Could God do it? Or would a death bring an end to God's plan of redemption? Would we be doomed to die in the wilderness? But, just like God exalted Moses and Joshua, so he exalted his only Son and lifted him to a place at his right hand. God gave him a name that is above every name, and subjected all things under his feet. This is a wonder. And just as Jesus was exalted, we are exalted with him. As Paul says in Ephesians, we have been made alive with Christ, raised with him and seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:5-6). Miracle of miracles!

Consider your own salvation this morning. Forget about everything that has gone right or wrong, all your possessions, all your plans, and stand at the Jordan and consider what God has done. Is that a wonder to you? Does it thrill you? Does it give you goose-bumps? As I reflected on this truth, I remembered that it was twenty-five years ago last month that I crossed over the Jordan.

I was tramping around in the wilderness and I was in trouble. But God led me to the shore, parted the waters for me, and I walked across on dry ground. I still can't fully understand how or why. It is a wonder to me.

Maybe you have not made that crossing yet. You are standing at the edge and you are fearful. You don't know what will happen. I invite you to cross over. All you have to do is put the sole of your foot in the water. Believe in the resurrection. God will do the rest. Ask Jesus to come into your life and enter into the land.

As he meditated on the wondrous events of that day, the psalmist wrote:

**They wandered in the wilderness in a desert region;
They did not find a way to an inhabited city,
They were hungry and thirsty;
Their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble;
He delivered them out of their distresses.
He led them also by a straight way,
To go to an inhabited city.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for His loving-kindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men.
For He has satisfied the thirsty soul,
And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good (Ps. 107:4-9).**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ and our salvation are wonders.

Here is the second point of application: As we enter into our life in Christ, God continues to do wonders.

Even after we have crossed over into our life in Christ we continue to face major crossings, times when everything changes. We cross over into new jobs, new neighborhoods, new cities, new demands, and God calls on us to take on new territory and defeat new enemies. We are fearful, but as we enter the land and live the life of faith, God continues to do wonderful things in our midst.

What strikes me about the text is how God leads us. He puts us in situations which are impossible unless he acts. God loves cliff-hangers. He loves bottom of the ninth, two-out rallies. He savors fourth quarter come-backs, winning with no time left on the clock. He brings us to the edge and then tells us to wait. We are anxious, but he waits until the impossibility of our circumstances is impressed upon us.

And notice that God leads by going way out in front. The image of God's leading, symbolized by the ark of the covenant, is marvelous. As God leads his people he wants to make it obvious that he is the one doing the leading. Furthermore, he wants a little distance between himself and us so that it is clear that he is working and we are not. He doesn't want us to run ahead of him. Parents will know what I am talking about. If you have taken your children on a hike, even if it's only to the shopping mall, you know that they are forever running

ahead of you. You have to tell them to wait for you, to not go around that corner until you get there first. This is what God has to do with us. We are always ready to take the lead, to run on ahead even though we have no idea where he is taking us. Paul has a word for us here, from his second Corinthian letter: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels in order that the surpassing greatness of the power may be from God and not from ourselves." If we are too close and too involved, we might become confused as to who is doing what. But God wants to make it obvious. He commands the waters and they cease to flow. Our life in Christ is often contrary to nature, so we need to let God lead.

I believe that God is going to do some great new things in our midst this year, and it is important for us to enter together, to let God lead, to not run ahead of him. That is how God leads his church, and how he leads us in our crossings, when we leave one thing behind and embark on a new season. So let us allow him to lead so that we can see his wonders at work among us, and let us content ourselves with being his faithful followers.

Here is the third point of application: God's wonders give us confidence of his presence and his power to dispossess our enemies.

God wants to do wonderful things in our midst to give us confidence that he is with us and that he will continue to be with us. These become powerful memories that will help us trust him at the next crossing. When we cross over into the land, we will face difficult times. Things will not always turn out the way we want. Enemies have to be defeated. Fearful situations have to be faced. Jebusites, Hivites—even termites—lie in wait for us! We will be tempted to trust in ourselves or to serve idols, but God wants us to dispossess our enemies and possess our life in Christ.

Every time I face an impossible task, an overwhelming enemy or a paralyzing fear, it always seems like the first time. I forget my history and everything that God has already done. I need to stop and recall that God has already done amazing things in my life. He has been faithful day in and day out. He has saved me from frustration and futility. He has caused me to cross over into new spheres of freedom and grace. He has given me wonderful victories over enemies. And so, if he has already done so much, I can be confident that he will be my help in the situations that I have to face. It will be possible to defeat the powerful enemies of sin and darkness and fear. As the Scripture declares, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Here is the final principle: The preparation for God's wonders is holiness; the response to God's wonders is

praise.

Once again, the theme of worship surfaces in the book of Joshua. Preparing for the crossing is crucial. We must consecrate ourselves, for God is going to do wonders. This is a picture of our responsibility. We must make ourselves holy, purifying our hearts. Rather than trying to build a bridge or figure out some other way to get from here to there, before we cross and before we go to war we have to take time to meditate, pray, to be quiet and cease striving. Our hearts must be clear so that we can see where God is leading. We have not gone this way before. We must focus our eyes so that we will not miss God's wonders. James tells us that the wisdom from above is "pure" (James 3:17). Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Our response to God's working should be praise and thanksgiving. Worship prepares our hearts and allows us to express our joy and amazement. Our praise is based not what we have done, but on what God has done. And this response is to always be public. When God does something miraculous, it is wrong to keep it hidden. Let us build memorials, write poems, frame pictures.

Next month, my wife and I are heading off to Timor, in Indonesia, to participate in a ministry with Eli Fangidae. We have gone through a long process trying to determine what God wants from us. I was fearful of taking her on a twelve-hour plane ride, to a very hot climate. When Eli heard that Liz was coming with me, he said they could hold the first women's conference ever on Timor! Ever since we made the decision to go, life has been bizarre, difficult and depressing. How will be able to do this? It is tempting to get our game plan all figured out, to forget about God's leading and rush ahead with our own ideas. But God has been reminding us that the first thing we have to do is worship him, to purify our hearts in preparation for the crossing ahead.

So in this beautiful story from the book of Joshua, we learn, as the children of Israel did on that great day when they put their feet into the Jordan and began the crossing that would take them into the promised land, that God wants us to worship him, to purify our hearts, to keep our eyes fixed upon his leading, and watch for his wonderful works which encourage us to face with faith the crossings in our own lives.

**Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel,
Who alone works wonders.
And blessed be His glorious name forever;
And may the whole earth be filled with His glory.
Amen, and Amen (Ps. 72:18-19).**

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