

Prepare to Cross Jordan - Joshua 3:1-6

Scripture Reading: Joshua 3:1-6

Joshua 3:1 “And Joshua rose early in the morning; and they removed from Shittim, and came to Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over.”

Joshua 3:2 “And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host;”

Joshua 3:3 “And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.”

Joshua 3:4 “Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

Joshua 3:5 “And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you.”

Joshua 3:6 “And Joshua spake unto the priests, saying, Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass over before the people. And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people.”

Israel Prepares to Enter the Promised Land

Joshua is book 6 of the Bible's 66 books. We are in chapter 3 of Joshua's 24 chapters, which is chapter 190 of the Bible's 1,189 chapters. This is where Israel begins entering the land God promised.

Moses has died, and the LORD has commanded Joshua to lead the people across Jordan. In chapter 2, two spies went to Jericho, where Rahab protected them. They returned and reported that the people living in the land were afraid of Israel.

That report told Joshua about the people across the river. But Israel still needed instructions for getting across. Chapter 3 begins with Israel leaving Shittim and coming to the bank of the Jordan River. Israel had wandered for forty years. Now the time to enter the promised land had come.

1. Came to Jordan, and Lodged There - Joshua 3:1

Joshua 3:1 “And Joshua rose early in the morning; and they removed from Shittim, and came to Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over.”

When the verse says they “removed,” it means they packed up their camp and left. Joshua rises early and goes with the people. He gets started on the work that has been set before him. They are going where God told them to go.

Joshua 1:2 “Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.”

God told Joshua to cross Jordan into the land He was giving Israel. They are acting on what God has already said.

Israel is moving toward the promised land as a nation—a great multitude of people. Joshua 1:14 explains that the wives, children, and cattle of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh would stay in their own territory on the eastern side of the river. Moses had given them that land. But their fighting men would still go with the other tribes to help them.

Joshua 3:1 tells us that they leave Shittim, arrive at Jordan, and stay there.

Joshua 3:1 “And Joshua rose early in the morning; and they removed from Shittim, and came to Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over.”

At this point, they have reached the river and are waiting for their next instructions. Later in this chapter, we find out that the Jordan was overflowing its banks during this time of harvest. A big obstacle stood between them and what God had promised to give them. The river was in their way.

Obey God Even When You See Obstacles

Even when there are visible obstacles and difficulties in your life, you can still choose to obey God and move forward.

When Jesus tells us to preach the gospel to every creature, that can be an intimidating task for some people. But you can keep moving forward in obedience, trusting God to help you and be with you.

Joshua and the Israelites had heard God's command. They were preparing in faith. Begin with what Scripture makes clear. Be ready to listen and learn what you need to do next.

2. Go After It - Joshua 3:2-4

Joshua 3:2-3 “And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host; And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.”

The “host” means the people gathered in the camp. The officers go through the camp and give them instructions. Before the people cross Jordan, they need to know when to move and what to follow.

The instructions are clear: when they see the priests carrying the ark, they must leave their places and follow it.

The Ark of the Covenant and God's Agreement with Israel

The ark of the covenant is a chest containing the stone tablets of God's law-the Ten Commandments. After bringing Israel out of Egypt, God made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai.

A covenant is a serious, binding agreement. God gave Israel His law and told them how to live and worship Him. Israel was responsible for obeying His commands. God promised blessings for obedience and warned of judgment for disobedience. The ark held the written commands of that agreement.

God had also appointed a place above the ark where He would speak with Moses.

Exodus 25:22 “And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.”

God told Moses that He would meet with him above the ark's mercy seat. There, God would give Moses His commands for Israel. This shows the ark's connection with God's presence and His instructions.

The same God who brought Israel out of Egypt and gave them His law is now directing their crossing of the Jordan. He has not left them.

The priests carrying the ark belong to Levi's tribe and are descendants of Aaron. God has given the ark and its bearers a place ahead of the people. Israel must follow the guide God has appointed.

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Follow the Instructions Carefully

The officers also tell the people how they must follow.

Joshua 3:4 “Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

They must leave a measured space of about two thousand cubits between themselves and the ark. A cubit is an ancient unit of length based on the forearm. A common historical estimate is about eighteen inches. Using that estimate, two thousand cubits would be roughly three thousand feet.

The verse tells us why they must keep this distance: “that ye may know the way by which ye must go.” Keeping the ark ahead, with space around it, would help the people follow its movement. Keeping their distance also fits with showing respect for the sacred ark. But the reason stated in the verse is to help them know the way.

The verse also says, “for ye have not passed this way heretofore.” “Heretofore” means before this time. Israel has never traveled this way as a nation. The spies have already crossed and returned, but the people need directions for their upcoming crossing. They need to pay attention to the instructions they have received.

Start with What God Has Already Made Clear

When you face something unfamiliar, or when you have to make decisions with unknown outcomes, start with what God has already made clear.

There have been many times in my life when I could not see how things were going to work out. I did not know what to do or where to go. But when you stick to what God tells you to do and follow His instructions, He will direct your path.

Give your attention to the details God has laid out for us. Israel was told to follow the ark and keep a certain distance. Those were important details God had established for them to follow.

God pays attention to details, and we should take time to understand His Word. Scripture gives us the guidance we need to live in a way that pleases Him.

You do not have to know how everything will turn out before you obey what God has already said.

3. Sanctify Yourself; Take Up the Ark - Joshua 3:5-6

Joshua 3:5 “And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you.”

The people have received instructions about following the ark. Now they are told to “sanctify yourselves.” To sanctify means to set apart as holy. In this setting, it involves preparing themselves through purification.

Joshua is telling the people to prepare themselves for what the LORD is about to do. They have arrived at the river, but their preparation involves more than packing their belongings and getting ready to travel.

Preparing to Meet God at Mount Sinai

This is a similar type of command to the one Israel received when they had to prepare to meet God at Mount Sinai.

Earlier, after God brought Israel out of Egypt, they came to Mount Sinai. This was the mountain where God would give them His law. Before the LORD came down upon the mountain, He told Moses to prepare the people.

Exodus 19:10-11 “And the LORD said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.”

Notice that God told Moses to sanctify the people, and He specifically told them to wash their clothes. Washing their clothes was part of the preparation God required for that occasion. They were preparing to meet the holy God who had brought them out of Egypt. They needed to take His instructions seriously and be ready at the time He appointed.

Now, at the Jordan River, Joshua tells the people to sanctify themselves. Joshua 3:5 does not give us a list of the specific actions they were to take. But the example at Mount Sinai helps us understand the kind of preparation involved.

They were to set themselves apart for God and prepare for His work to be done among them. The God who was about to lead them across Jordan is holy. Their preparation needed to reflect that.

Be Ready to Serve God

For us, this gives an application about being ready to serve God. We should take our conduct seriously. If we know something in our lives is sinful, we need to get it out. If we know what God has commanded, we should be willing to obey it.

The New Testament also connects being sanctified with being prepared for God's use.

2 Timothy 2:21 “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.”

A vessel is a container, such as a cup or a bowl. Here, Paul uses it as an illustration of a person who can be useful to God. “Meet for the master's use” means suitable for the Master to use. Notice the connection between being “sanctified” and being “prepared unto every good work.”

As believers in Jesus, we are sanctified through the offering of His body. We are cleansed and made holy through faith in Jesus. We should also give attention to our obedience as we prepare to serve the LORD.

Now look at the reason Joshua gives for their preparation: “for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you.” Later in this chapter, the LORD will stop the waters of Jordan so that Israel can cross on dry ground.

The river that stood in their way would become a place where they witnessed God's power. The people were responsible for following His instructions, and God would perform the miracle. They were preparing to obey because they believed.

Put God's Instructions into Practice

Verse 6 shows those instructions being put into action.

Joshua 3:6 “And Joshua spake unto the priests, saying, Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass over before the people. And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people.”

The instructions the officers had announced were now being carried out. The priests went ahead, and the people were to follow.

Hearing God's instructions should lead to acting on them. We can understand a command and still delay obeying it. The priests received their instructions and carried them out. When Scripture makes our responsibility clear, we need to put it into practice.

If the Bible commands people who are able to work to do so, then we need to work. If the Bible tells us to esteem others better than ourselves, then we need to do that. If the Bible tells us to be swift to hear and slow to wrath, then we need to listen carefully and be slow to anger.

We hear so many commands, yet we often fail to act on them. We should keep working to obey God more faithfully.

Prepare and Take the Next Step in Obedience

In this passage, Israel has reached the Jordan River, but they have not crossed it yet. God has promised them the land, and now they are receiving instructions for the crossing. They need to sanctify themselves, follow the ark, and pay attention to the directions they have received. The LORD will make the way across. Their responsibility is to prepare and obey.

We also saw that they had not passed this way before. They were going somewhere unfamiliar, but God was directing them. You may face something unfamiliar in your own life. You may not know how things will work out, but you can still follow what God has made clear in His Word.

Sometimes we become so concerned about what will happen next that we neglect what God has already told us to do. Keep reading His Word. Take the opportunities you have to give someone the gospel. If you know something is sinful, turn away from it. These are responsibilities you can act on while you are still working through other questions.

Think about what you have heard from God's Word and what you need to put into practice. Is there a responsibility you have been putting off? Is there something in your life you need to change?

Ask God for wisdom and help, and take the next step in obedience.