

The Living God Is Among You

Joshua 3 – 5 ⁱ

Our God is a Consuming Fire

In Deuteronomy 9, when Moses had gathered the people of Israel on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River, he said to them:

¹ “Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan today, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to heaven, ² a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard it said, ‘Who can stand before the sons of Anak?’ ³ Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly, as the LORD has promised you. Deuteronomy 9:1–3 (ESV)

Of course, it would be a little more than a month before they made the crossing. Moses had to finish the reiteration of the law which is the Book of Deuteronomy, then it was time for a final blessing of Israel, and then, after laying hands on Joshua to ordain him as the leader of Israel, Deuteronomy 34 tells us:

⁵ So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD... ⁸ And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days... Deuteronomy 34:5–8 (ESV)

Then, as we saw last week in Joshua chapter 1,

¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, ² “Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Joshua 1:1–2 (ESV)

But God’s promise was still valid.

³ ...He who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly... Deuteronomy 9:1–3 (ESV)

This was the promise of the Living God, and (as I may have mentioned once or twice), God always keeps His promises. So, this promise that the Lord would go over the Jordan before them is still in the background when we come to chapter 3, and we see it vividly portrayed for us in our text.

¹ Then Joshua rose early in the morning and they set out from Shittim. And they came to the Jordan, he and all the people of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over. ² At the end of three days the officers went through the camp ³ and commanded the people, “As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, **then you shall set out from your place and follow it.** Joshua 3:1–3 (ESV)

For this is **how** the Lord would go before them from this time on. The last reference to the pillar of cloud that had led them since Egypt is in Deuteronomy 31. Now, they are commanded,

“As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, **then you shall set out from your place and follow it.** ⁴ Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits in length. Joshua 3:3–4 (ESV)

(which is roughly a kilometer)

You Have Not Passed this Way Before

But Joshua went on to explain:

Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.” Joshua 3:4–5 (ESV)

And as always, scholars vary on how to understand this statement, but in his book, Joshua: No Falling Words, Dale Ralph Davis, formerly professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary wrote:

...this way all could see Yahweh’s great deed and all could know the path to take.ⁱⁱ

And this was important because, as Joshua said, they had not passed this way before. The land that lay before them was unknown, and more so, the experience of Yahweh as a consuming fire that would drive out the people of the land. We learn more about this in subsequent verses, but quickly, a question suggested by Francis Schaeffer in his commentary, “Was God unjust?”

Was God Unjust?

“Was it unjust for Joshua to drive out the people who were in the land?” ⁱⁱⁱ Schaeffer suggested that this was a gigantic question for the people of 1975 and if it was true then, it is even more so now, but the question is answered for us by Scripture itself. Long before Joshua led the people across the Jordan God had said to Abraham:

¹³ ...“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions...¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” Genesis 15:13–16 (ESV)

Schaeffer went on, writing:

Many of the Canaanite cities have been dug up, and one can see that the statuettes which were worshipped by the Canaanites at this period were overwhelmingly perverse. The worship was wrapped up not only with complete rebellion against God, but with all kinds of sexual sin. The statuettes were as pornographic as some of today’s worst pictures! And in its violence, their culture became equal to ours. So in Moses’ time God said, “All right, it is

time for the judgment.” This reminds us that there is “death in the city” in our own culture.^{iv}

Which is a sermon for another day, but, as Paul wrote in Romans chapter 2:

⁴ ...do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. Romans 2:4–5 (ESV)

As it was revealed against the world of Noah’s day, when

⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually... Genesis 6:5 (ESV)

and He finally said, “Enough.” As it was revealed against the Canaanites when, after 400 years of “forbearance and patience” God led His people across the Jordan to execute judgement against those who had presumed on His patience for so long.

The Lord Will do Wonders Among You

So, this crossing—this conquest—is the work of Almighty God, which is why, before they crossed,

⁵ ...Joshua said to the people, “Consecrate yourselves... Joshua 3:5 (ESV)

(“Be ready”)

...for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.” Joshua 3:5 (ESV)

But there’s something here that we may missed when we heard this story 50 times in Sunday School and VBS. In the 17 verses of Joshua chapter 3, the “ark of the covenant” is mentioned 10 times, three times in just verses 6 – 8:

⁶ And Joshua said to the priests, “Take up **the ark of the covenant** and pass on before the people.” So they took up **the ark of the covenant** and went before the people. ⁷ The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. ⁸ And as for you, command the priests who bear **the ark of the covenant**, ‘When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” Joshua 3:6–8 (ESV)

In fact, the ark is mentioned so many times in connection with the crossing of the Jordan that it’s starts to feel awkward when you read the passage out loud. It almost seems as though the ark of the covenant is the primary actor in this story, and this is just the point. Verses 10 – 13:

¹⁰ ...Joshua said, “**Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you** and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. ¹¹ **Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan.**” Joshua 3:10–11 (ESV)

¹³ ...when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.” Joshua 3:13 (ESV)

Which, I am told, is not something that water does, but neither do storms calm themselves, or dead men walk, restored, out of tombs, but these things do happen when “the Lord of all the earth” visits His people with deliverance and salvation.

¹⁰ ...“Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you...¹¹ **Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan.**

Joshua 3:10–11 (ESV)

So, God commands His people to do something which they would not have been able to do, as we will see, and then He leads His people, going before them into the flood. Verses 14 and following:

¹⁴ So, when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water... Joshua 3:14–15 (ESV)

(and just in case we thought that maybe this was no big deal, Joshua adds),

(now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest)... Joshua 3:15 (ESV)

But still, “as soon as...the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brim of the water,”

¹⁶ the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. Joshua 3:16 (ESV)

Not only that, but verse 17 goes on to tell us:

¹⁷ Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly **on dry ground** in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over **on dry ground** until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. Joshua 3:14–17 (ESV)

Our Helper He Amid the Flood

So, just as their fathers had passed through the Red Sea “on dry ground”^v when fleeing the wrath of Pharaoh, now they too had seen with their own eyes the salvation of their God as they passed through the Jordan River at flood stage, and did so “on dry ground”. And I want to be clear, this really happened as Scripture says it did. It was a literal miracle. We cannot make this a metaphor. We dare not relegate it to the Veggie Tales file. Davis wrote:

The object of this text then is to impress us with the adequacy of God, to grill into us that God is not merely a three-letter word of our Christian jargon, not merely the honorary leader of our club, but is the living God who works and intervenes and comes and saves and rescues and counsels his people in all their perplexities. He is indeed “the Lord of all the

earth' (vv. 11, 13), not a mere Little League deity. So we must renounce our tendency to 'punify' God, to carve him down to our stature and limit him to our possibilities.^{vi}

You may remember a line from "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" that says, "our Helper, He, amid the flood..." and indeed, as God helped Israel, leading them through both the river and the sea on dry ground He continues to provide deliverance and salvation for His people today, and in just the same way. Remember, the angel said to Joseph,

²¹ ...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21 (ESV)

The Living God has been and remains among us and as the ark of the covenant passed through the flood waters of the Jordan to deliver God's people and lead them on to victory, the Lord Jesus Christ

²⁵ ...was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Romans 4:25 (ESV)

And as they trusted God whose presence was manifest in the ark of the covenant,

¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf... Hebrews 6:19–
²⁰ (ESV)

So, in this season of advent we say with John the Baptist,

²⁹ ... "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! John 1:29 (ESV)

Behold our God!

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words, Focus on the Bible Commentary* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 33.
 - iii Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, vol. 2* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 198.
 - iv Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works*, 200.
 - v Cf. Exodus 14: 22.
 - vi Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words*, 36.