

Avoiding the *Small God* Trap *Joshua 3*

Introduction: There are certain things in life that possess simultaneous **beauty** and **danger**: the Alaskan wilderness, with its breathtaking canvass, wide array of wildlife, and sheer power that can consume travelers and explorers who disregard or disrespect that power. A fire, contained in a pit or fireplace can bring warmth, comfort, and visual stimulation, but when it is not respected or contained can wreck havoc on those it consumes. A hike up the face of Half-Dome, which is awe inspiring and immense, yet with one little slip or a strong wind can cause the mortal body to become immortal to those inattentive hikers who lose the sense of wonder.

This is how we often approach or view God. God is the transcendent One, the all-powerful, all-knowing, sovereign One over the entire universe. He holds the entire universe in His hands, and all the nations are like a drop in the bucket to Him (Isa. 40:12-15). He is all encompassing, and though He has made Himself known, He never loses the immensity of His power or greatness. Yet we often find ourselves thinking He is smaller than He is, or less powerful, or less able or simply an add-on in our life. We lose the sense of awe and wonder with God and He becomes normal, safe, and even wimpy. This is not just the propensity of some, but we all will allow God to be much smaller, to limit Him in our thinking in some area at some point in our life. When this happens, there are consequences.

What is the result of limiting God, or making God small in our thinking:

- **We live in FEAR** – We fear people instead of God; we fear failure; we fear change or loss of comfort
- **We live in ANXIETY** – When God is small, problems seem big and hard things are an affront to us, not something God is using to grow us. When God is small the unknown future seems daunting instead of hopeful
- **We live in PRAYERLESSNESS** – We pray small, general, or selfish prayers because we don't *really* believe God can do great things
- **We live in JOYLESSNESS** – When God is small, happiness only can come when things go according to our plan. When God is big (properly placed), joy is had in every and all circumstances, knowing that He is working everything according to His good pleasure. When God is small, we tend to **complain, grumble, and lack contentment**.

So how do avoid this subtle yet tempting trap? How do we make sure that God stays huge in our thinking, prayer, and outlook? What is needed to assure that will not become less than He is?

This is what faced Israel on the East side of the Jordan River in Joshua 3. They could be racked with fear, anxiety, and distrust heading into the Promised Land. God, in His infinite grace and kindness, He gave Joshua and the people another living lesson to trust Him. In rolling back the waters of the Jordan, He not only repeated the miracle first given to Moses at the Red Sea (Exodus 14 – showing that God would get the glory over Pharaoh), but gave the people something **clear and tangible** to trust and follow. In seeing God do the same miracle, they knew that God was still active with them, just as He had been with their fathers.

The Situation:

Chapter's 3-5 of Joshua cover the **preparation at the Jordan**, as the people readied themselves to possess the Promised Land. **Chapter 4** covers the fact that God made a memorial for the people to remember what happened at this exact time in history. **Chapter 5** tells of the reinstatement of

circumcision, Passover, and the cessation of manna, with the reminder that God was the One leading them into battle. Chapter 3 moves the narrative from one side of the river to the other, which seems simple. However, the Holy Spirit took great lengths to detail out **how** this mass of thousands of people got to the other side so that we would all see God is Glorious, not small.

I. **Preparing ourselves to see God's Activity (3:1-6)**

The first thing that jumps off the page of Joshua 3 in reading the whole chapter is the emphasis on the **Ark of the Covenant**. This is the first mention of it since Deuteronomy 31, and its first appearance in the book of Joshua. It is mentioned **9 times** here, and another 7 times in chapter 4. Exodus 25 gives specific detail as to the dimensions, decoration, and function of the Ark, which was where the Law was placed and where atonement was made once a year on the mercy seat (see Leviticus 16). The Ark symbolized God's holiness, justice, and mercy, but also symbolized something even greater. Just as God guided Moses by a pillar of fire, God's presence was with them in the form of the Ark.

"The ark symbolized God's sovereignty, power, or rule, and the point of the crossing of the Jordan led by the ark was that God was the same in His power on this occasion as he had been earlier when the people crossed the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses."¹

God commanded the people to camp for 3 days, and then told them the Ark was going to move out first, carried by the Levitical priests (who were the official go-betweens from the people to God). Then He gave **2 specific commands** for the people to follow, both in **preparation** for what God was going to do the next day. But why were these commands given so specifically? So that the people would NOT MISS what God was about to do.

A. Stepping Back for Clarity

Joshua 3:4 Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits in length. Do not come near it, **in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.**"

The first command was to step back and let the Ark go ahead. The distance would be 2000 cubits, or 3000 feet, or just over a ½ mile. Why such a specific amount of space? It could have been because of the holiness of the Ark, but that does not seem to be the emphasis here. God wanted to make sure that it was clear that **He was leading** the people, and that each of them **saw** the miracle that He was about to do. Being too close to the Ark would mean certain of the people would miss what was going to happen, they would miss who was out in front, and would confuse human leadership with God's. They needed to step back to have the right **perception**, the proper **perspective**, and **see clearly** that God was at work in their midst.

We need to gain the same clarity. Often we miss what God is doing among us because we are too close or too involved with the issues of life to see Him working. This is why we ask the question, "*where is God*" in certain situations, because we have lost all sense of who He really is. We miss God when we go through trials and only see them as negative hardships without understanding that God is working them out for our growth. We lose perspective when we read life through the lens of emotion **ONLY** and fail to see that God is the ultimate comforter and counselor to our soul. This means we need to **step back often**, to understand God's entire nature, to meditate on His Word, to soak in who He is as often as we can, so that we can have clarity in the midst of mundane, confusing, complex, and difficult life issues.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua*, p. 37.

B. Confessing Consistently

Joshua 3:5-6 Then Joshua said to the people, "**Consecrate yourselves**, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." 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.

But stepping back is not enough. To see God clearly we must also **consecrate ourselves**. That is not a word we use often, but it simply means to purify or to cleanse. In order for Israel to truly see God's wonders, they had to deal with their own **sin**. This was making sure that if they had any un-confessed sin or any sin that had not been properly purified, to take care of it before God worked.

But why was this so important? Why is it important for us to be **sanctified or purified**? The reason is this: when we have sin in our life that has not been confessed or identified, our lens gets blurry in seeing and savoring the work of God in our life. In other words, when we are living in pride, selfishness, laziness, discontentment, or any other sin at the level of our heart or mind, we are **unable** to comprehend what God is doing. Sin, by nature, covers and deceives. It places the focus of our life on us and away from God. We must confess our sin not for the purpose of **being saved**, since our sins are forgiven once for all, but for the sake of fellowship with God. When we are walking in sin we miss the sweetness of the work of God, both in the mundane and extravagant. Worship becomes something akin to going through the motions instead of beholding the beauty and awe of the Lord. When sin is left to reign in our life, we miss the work of God.

Are you prepared for the work of God? He is always at work, He is always making Himself known, but do you miss it? Is it because you have lost the perspective of who He is, or is it because you are walking through life with foggy lenses? We need to step back and confess our sin in order to see and savor the work of God in every aspect of life.

II. **Embracing the Assurance of God's Greatness (3:7-13)**

A. The Look-back of Reassurance

Joshua 3:7 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."

God, in His grace, gave Joshua a Moses experience. Though Moses is counted as a man of great faith (Heb. 11:23-29) and humility (Num. 12:3), he still needed reassurance from God that He was really with him. Whether it was the sign of his rod, the 10 plagues, or water from a rock Moses' faith was strengthened as God clearly showed Himself. The crossing of the Red Sea was a grandiose show of God's strength. Exodus 14 explains not only what God did, but *why* He did what He did. He hardened Pharaoh's heart so that He would receive glory and that the Egyptians would know He was the LORD (v. 4), and that everyone would know that God fought for His people (v. 25). God led by a pillar, blocked the path of the Egyptians and made the Sea into a wall. In doing this, it not only protected His own, but they were filled with proper **fear and believed in the LORD** (v. 31).

Joshua needed the same thing. God rolled back the river so that the people could walk through on dry ground. The big difference between the two events was the fact that God brought Israel **away** from their enemy with Moses and brought Israel **toward** their enemy with Joshua. In doing this, He gave a tangible show that He truly was with Joshua and all the people knew that he was truly the leader.

B. The Logic of Assurance

Joshua 3:10 And 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.

There was clear logic behind this action. The logic was that of smaller to greater. If God could conquer the Egyptians, He was powerful enough to lead the people out of slavery. If God was great enough to stop up a river, He is great enough to conquer the inhabitants of a foreign yet Promised Land. This is why there is such great detail in this account:

*"The object of the text is to impress us with the **adequacy of God**; to grill into us that God is 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 complexities."*

This is exactly what Israel and Joshua needed, but it's also exactly what WE need. We need to know that God is not token, that God is not simply a word that's uttered casually, but is living, active, and powerful. But how do we see God? Sometimes I think if God would simply do some phenomenal, dramatic show in nature (who wouldn't want to turn a stick into a snake, stop up a river, or something real practical, like the lawn to mow itself), that maybe **then** we would know He is real, that He is living, that He is active. However, He doesn't assure us with those things, but something more dramatic, powerful, and phenomenal. It has everything to do with Jesus:

Romans 8:31-32 *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

Notice the "if....then...." connection of these verses. If God is for us, and if He gave His own Son, what are we going to be without???!!! What do we have to fear? What do we have to be anxious about? What hinders us from not praying, or from a lack of joy?

*"The rescue at the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan, and the death and resurrection of Christ are explosions of God's power that are meant to color the whole horizon of the believer's life in order to assure us that the God who so mightily handles great emergencies is surely adequate for the smaller crises and anxieties that beset us."*²

When we understand this, when we hold to it, we begin to truly believe the clear promises given to us **in Christ**:

In everyday life & prayer:

Ephesians 3:20-21 Now to **him** who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In prayer for the salvation of others:

Matthew 19:25-26 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

² Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words*, p. 36.

We can be reassured because we have Christ and the Holy Spirit residing IN US. This is how we know, this is how we believe, and this is how we see. The God who gave us His own Son for salvation is the same God who is at work in and through us for our good and His glory. But there is something that still nags at our mind and heart? It still seems that God works in ways that don't make sense, that seem that He is against us or indifferent toward us. How many have ever wondered, "what are you doing, God? Why would you allow/cause THIS to happen? Why would you not do things differently that make more sense?" I believe the end of Joshua 3 gives insight into this ongoing conundrum.

III. **Strengthening our Resolve with God's Strangeness (3:14-17)**

A. The Method to the Madness

Joshua 3:15-16 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 (**now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest**),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.

Notice that the last few verses give great detail of this river crossing.

- The priests had to step into the water without knowing exactly what was going to happen. In other words, they had to step into a rushing river like one of those falling back trust exercises
- The Jordan River, which is normally placid and anything but raging, was impassable for this many people during the rainy season. Instead of 3 feet deep, it would go up to 12. Instead of a hundred feet across, it became hundreds. Instead of a gentle flow, the river became full of white caps and a torrid current. This was the worst and least likely time to cross.
- This was also the point of no return. When they crossed the river and it subsequently closed behind them, there was no going back. A roaring river was behind, and an enemy in front cause them to trust God alone.

A casual observer would note that this was crazy, an impossible time to attempt a crossing. They would be right. But God is not crazy, nor does He simply do things simply to mess with us. He set things up so that there would be no doubt WHO was doing it, and exactly WHO the people needed to trust. This is instructive for us.

B. The Message of the Madness

This is why we trust God even when things don't make sense or jive with our concept of how God should do things.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight." **Proverbs 3:5-6**

The message is clear: trust Him. Trust the One who sees the beginning and the end. Trust the One who knows what He is doing, knows why you are going through pain, knows why you have to wait, knows why things seem messed up. Trust God who is gracious and gives good things, even when our definition of "good" may be different than His. We trust God because He is for us, not against us.

Commitment Point:

- What holds you back from seeing God clearly? To say it another way, do you consistently see God at work, do you see circumstances as reasons for joy, and are you constantly amazed in worship over the everyday grace of God? If so, how do you make sure you continue? If not, what is holding you back?
- How does this whole concept, that God works in strange ways yet is always at work, affect the way you approach corporate worship? How about trial/crisis/circumstances? How about your prayer life? How about maintaining proper fear – fear of the Lord, not of people?
- What are some promises that you cling to when you are tempted to be fearful and anxious?
- Why is the knowing that God works in strange ways reassuring?