

Preparing for Wonder

Jonathan K. Dodson | Joshua 3-4 | February 7, 2018

We're picking up in Joshua 3 and 4 where Israel is about to cross into the land God promised. It's been a long time coming, five hundred years since the original promise to Abraham. Expectation is through the roof. But before they step foot into Canaan, a couple million Israelites must cross a raging river a mile wide, ten to twelve feet deep. No boats, no bridge, no possible device. How will they do it? Prepare for wonder, Pursue Wonder, Remember Wonder.

Preparing for Wonder

All Israel arises from camp, gathers their belongings, and sets out for the lush land of Canaan. Until they reach the Jordan river. Even today melting snow from the Lebanon mountains can combine with the river to create mudslides and block it for days. A massive obstacle lay in their path. So to cross the river, Joshua has the whole nation *wait*. They lodge, meaning they set up to spend the night. And after three emotion-teeming days Joshua sends officers to give them instructions. They will cross tomorrow, behind the ark, but for now they must *prepare*, "[Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you](#) (3:5). The word **consecrate** means to "make holy, to set apart." It was something Israel did in preparation to worship. *They prepared to wonder*. It included washing their garments, confessing sins, hearing Scripture, abstaining from sex. Now why would they do that? It was a deliberate choice to limit physical pleasure in order to heighten spiritual faculties. A kind of sexual fasting, which St. Paul suggests occasionally for Christians for the purpose of prayer. This reminds us our bodies are supremely, not vessels of unrestrained pleasure, but temples for worship. We are made for something transcendent. *What would you be willing to forgo to seek God? What gets in the way? Sleep? Work? Take a day off to seek him. Food? Fast from certain foods. The uninterrupted flow of information? Fast from social media/entertainment and prepare to wonder. If this is unthinkable, you probably have another religion on your hands, another deity enslaving your appetites, curbing them from what's truly deserving of your worship.* The Atlantic ran an article recently about how **fitness** in America has become a kind of religion. It notes how we pay a tithe to a club, wear symbols to publicly identify ourselves, and gather into small rooms to grunt and groan our way to euphoria. The goal is to reach the zone, to push beyond physical boundaries. We're told to innovate ourselves, to reach higher. What's the true you? Let her out, an instructor will cry out. Or you're going to make some bad decisions this weekend so turn it up, self-atone, carve out a "fit" identity. Surrounded by mirrors, we prepare to wonder *over our own bodies, workout accomplishments*. A religion of the Self. We become what Walk the Moon sings, "[I am my own best friend, teacher, Friday night, sanctuary, hero, love of my life.](#)" When we are the own love of our lives, it is impossible to truly worship, to open ourselves up to God, to say without a catch in our throat, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, in my life as it is in heaven." But Joshua reminds us we're *set apart to God*. To prepare to wonder over something truly great. How? He says, "[Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God](#) (3:9). I love the warmth, an invitation. He doesn't say "have you been in the Word, did you have your devotional? It's much deeper than that. He says have you heard my words, entered my presence? Will you allow me to shape your life, to prepare you for wonder? With the river ahead, Joshua

doesn't give a three point strategy or a five year plan. He calls them closer to God. When we face an obstacle, when you're in a trial, what we need most is something greater to trust.

Following the Ark

What are these wonders? Joshua says follow the ark and the waters will stand in a heap! As soon as the priests carrying the ark step foot into the Jordan, they see dry ground. The river recedes, revealing a riverbed, extending to the city of Adam some nineteen miles away, a path wide enough for an entire nation to cross! How does this happen? By following the ark. The ark is so significant its mentioned 10 times in this chapter alone. Think about it. The ark was a wooden, rectangular box overlaid with gold, with two cherubim on top of the lid, which was called the mercy seat, and the cherubim faced each other wings outstretched toward one another. *Angels, a seat, gold.* It had four golden rings at each corner, through which wooden rods also covered in gold, would slide through to carry it. These kept the priests from touching the ark. Notice, Israel is told to keep a distance, about half a mile, as they follow. Partially for visibility, but also to keep people from touching the ark. Now why? The ark was kept in the holy of holies, a perfectly square room in the tabernacle, and this room was where the glory cloud of God's presence descended. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the room. A dark curtain closed off the room, decorated with angelic figures. Nothing was allowed above the ark. And as it turns out the ark was the exact measurement of ancient royal footrests. The ark signifies YHWH's footstool to his cosmic throne. Enthroned above the heavens, his holy feet rested on the ark, his extremities so holy, so utterly pure, *that if you touched the ark you would die. Holiness kills the unholy.* The ark tells us God is set apart, transcendent, deserving of total worship. This is a concept our society desperately needs. Here's why. Holiness gives us consistent standard of purity, right and wrong, a basis for what is just, moral, true. Without it we just make up the rules as we go, configure a morality or truth that suits us, and when you have entire populations doing that, values begin to collide. On the one hand a group will want complete and total sexual freedom, while the other will want tight restrictions and protection. Who's to say who is right? Without holiness, there is no standard to call something good or evil. There is only preference. And when a society begins to run on preference, attending mainly to the Self, there is no God to whom we can appeal. But deep down we know we make bad decisions, and try to atone for them through workouts, volunteerism, being good, eating right. Physical solutions for spiritual pathologies. Doesn't work. The anxiety, fear, envy, and anger symptoms of our pathology. They point to the cure, the longing to be whole, to be set apart not to ourselves but to the one who is pure and true, to the Holy One. But if you touch him you die! What's the solution? The mercy seat. Once a year the high priest would enter the holy of holies and approach the ark, and he would sprinkle blood from a sacrifice onto the mercy seat. This symbolized the death of something else, stepping in between the consuming holiness of God and the unholiness of humanity. Holiness kills. Years later Jesus blood would be sprinkled, splattered on another mercy seat the shape of a cross atoning for our unholiness, to make us whole in God's sight, holy like his resurrected Son. Jesus is the true seat of mercy. Holiness kills Jesus, but his mercy sets us free. How do we cultivate the wonder? It's not enough to *prepare* for wonder; we have to *pursue* it. The untouchable God embraces us in Christ. Assurance: To all who seek the mercy of God I say, in Christ Jesus your sins are forgiven. Seek his mercy. Stay behind the ark! Don't get out in front you're

your own performance, or lag too far behind in indifference. Stay close. Life with God *depends* on the mercy seat.

Remember the Wonder

After Israel crossed the Jordan, they commemorated the wonder by taking twelve stones, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, and stacked them where they lodged. This act tells us several important things. Joshua says, [these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever](#) (4:7). First, remember what God has done. How do you remind yourself of what God has done for you? Israel stacked stones to remind themselves that God keeps his promises. We stack stones on a hike, memorialize through writing, singing, painting. Last summer. [Renewal of Pastoral Call] I jotted them down in a journal. Last fall when the headwinds of ministry hit, and I was tired, I pulled out that journal *to remember what God had done, what he promised, and it filled me with fresh encouragement to keep going.* Figure out a way to remember what God has done. Second, remember together. The memorial was for the community. There wasn't a memorial for every individual. Instead, there were twelve stones representing twelve communities. Remembering Christ is a community effort. I shared the story of God's works with my friends, and when I was having a hard day one of them said to me, remember the Lord is the Shepherd. How can you help one another remember Christ, rely on the mercy seat? Bring his words into City Groups, Fight Clubs, everyday life. This week someone in our CG sent an email with a verse. That's it. No commentary, no preaching. She helped us remember together that God keeps his promises. Joshua also puts the memorial in context of generations, [When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean then you shall let your children know, Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground'](#) (22). Adults how are you helping our children remember what God has done? If you are serving in Kids Life or Youth Life, bless you for making sure the gospel doesn't skip a generation. Parents, what are you doing at home to remember together? We'll post a blog on resources to help you this week. Third, remember for others. Joshua tells them ultimately why: ["For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.](#) God's work is not just for us; it is for the world. As a church we exist, not merely for ourselves but for the city, that all the peoples of the earth need to know what you know, that the hand of the Lord is mighty and merciful. As you remember God's mighty work, to save you, comfort you, bring you mercy not judgment, wholeness and joy, tell others. Fourth, remember God. Remember and fear him. Remember not just what he has done but *who he is.* Don't merely use him; worship him. Follow the ark and fear the Lord. He is holy and there is none like him. As Rahab said, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth below." Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool. Remember God and recover wonder. Prepare for wonder, pursue wonder, and remember Wonder.