

JOSHUA 3 & 4: Select Verses
END OF THE TRAIL / HOME AT LAST

3 ¹⁴ So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, ¹⁵ and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), ¹⁶ that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷ Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan. . . .

4 ⁸ And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. ⁹ Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day. . . .

¹⁵ Then the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, ¹⁶ “Command the priests who bear the ark of the Testimony to come up from the Jordan.” ¹⁷ Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, “Come up from the Jordan.” ¹⁸ And it came to pass, when the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD had come from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet touched the dry land, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before. . . .

²⁰ And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal. ²¹ Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: “When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What are these stones?’ ²² then you shall let your children know, saying, ‘Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land’; ²³ for the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over, ²⁴ that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.”

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Have you ever heard of the statue “End of the Trail,” sculpted a hundred years ago by James Fraser? The sculpture depicts a Native American with his horse, both extremely fatigued and exhausted. Their bodies slump forward. Perhaps it was a failed hunting trip, a lost battle, or the fading of their entire way-of-life as the white settlers overrun the land—the sad “End of the Trail.” A large bronze replica of the statue is located in Waupun, Wisconsin, just a few miles from the farm where my mother grew up. I have seen the statue many times. I have always assumed the “end of the trail” meant they were nearly home.

Today’s text is an End of the Trail account. It describes the end of a long, arduous journey. To put the text into perspective, imagine you are twelve years old; the year is 1936. Drought and depression ravage the great plains and the nation. Your family’s situation, near hopeless. Your father decides to vacate the ranch / the farm. You are moving to a more prosperous location. Hope glitters in the hearts of all at the chance for a new start. But, for one thing, and then another, the trip itself drags on—one year, two years, five years, ten years. Forty years later—1976—you finally arrive! Whoo hoo!—no more living on the move! A farm/a ranch with much promise in a pleasant setting. Quite unlike the sculpture, this trail ends with joy!

Our text. After forty years of traveling, the Children of Israel are entering the Promised Land, the land of Rest, which was pledged by God to their forefather Abraham some 600 years earlier. The promise and its fulfillment were in their sites when they—who had become slaves in Egypt—left Egypt as conquerors! Ten Plagues sent by God broke the will and the spirit of ungodly, proud Egypt and Pharaoh. God’s prophet Moses was Israel’s leader. Great miracles accompanied them—daily food and water provided by the Lord, clothes and sandals that did not wear out, the cloud of the Lord’s presence leading the way, protection vs. those who attacked—and forgiveness for the many times they gave up on God and went their own way. They finally were at The End of the Trail. They were not “done for”—yes, sick of wandering and traveling—but not “done for.” The Lord was still abundantly with them. The generation of objectors and rejectors who did not cling to the Lord, had all died in the wilderness. The children, those who were twenty and younger when the trip started, now safely reached its conclusion! They were in good hands, God’s hands, the hands of the Lord of mercy, and forgiveness and rescue. He had even promised that His Son would take human flesh, be born from their own people, to set them free from sin and death forever. Trail’s End! They had arrived!

The Jordan River, now at spring flood stage, separated them from this “land of milk and honey.” With God, that was no issue. The Lord spoke to Joshua, just as He had to Moses (now dead). God told Joshua to direct the Priests—the tabernacle/temple/worship center “servants” of God—to carry the “Ark of the Covenant,” to the waters of the Jordan. An “ark” was a container to keep things safe. Remember Noah’s huge “ark” for Noah and the animals? This ark was a “box” about 2 feet x 4 feet x 2 feet. In it were the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments which God had given Moses, and also a jar of manna—the miracle food God provided each day on the trip. On top of the ark was “the mercy seat” / “the atonement cover.” There the blood of the innocent lamb would be sprinkled on the Great Day of Atonement each year. Above the atonement cover or mercy seat, God’s presence was with Israel.

God has been traveling with you all your life, from the day you were parted from mother at the miracle of birth by the severing of the umbilical cord, to this very day—through easy times or hard. Your sins too are mercifully forgiven in Jesus whose blood covers and atones for your offenses against His Commands. God has brought you to today, and to today’s security-joy-and-peace in Jesus.

The river was at flood stage—harvest time, March, April, May. The river was extra wide. The priests were carrying the Ark of the Covenant—the Ark of God’s presence—by means long poles inserted through rings attached to its sides. When the feet of the priests stepped into the waters coming downstream, the waters were cut off. They were held back by the hand of God, with or without any physical dam (landslide?), at the cities of Adam and Zaretan, a great distance away. Waters below the stoppage flowed away, and the river bed was immediately dry! What a glorious and victorious Trail’s End!

Take a moment to consider the width of that path. The path had to be wider than a mere path, even wider than a four-lane interstate (12 feet per lane, plus shoulders plus median—say 100 feet)! If we lined up people along highway 12 in Lemmon, from one end of town to the other (about a mile, 5280 feet), and allowed each person two or three feet of space, we could line up 2000 people. If we had another row of 2000 people after, and another row, etc., and all began moving forward over the curb at the rate of two rows every five seconds—that would be 4,000 people in five seconds, or 50,000 people per minute! It would still take 4 hours to get 1 million people across the curb! We also know that when Israel left Egypt, there were c 600,000 men of fighting age—over 20. The entire must have been 2-3 million people, or more. It would 8-12 hours to get that many people to step over the curb in Lemmon. I think the miraculously dried-up path was more than only a mile wide!

To remind the people and the children! of how the Lord brought them safely out of Egypt—crossing the Red Sea also on dry ground—and then crossing the Jordan River at flood stage, into Canaan, on dry ground, twelve men (one from each tribe) were told to carry a stone on their shoulder (large!) to the place called Gilgal, where Israel would camp. These would be set up as a pillar. Joshua then took 12 more stones and set them up where the priests were standing—at the edge of the river-at-flood-stage, or further into the middle. Two memorial pillars. (Perhaps five stones were laid in a circle with one in the middle—this first layer had six stones. Then five more stones were placed on top of the them, one on e “seam.” And finally one more stone on top of the five. Thus a “pyramid” shaped marker. Perhaps.) These two pillars would be memorial markers and reminders.

Notice the concern for instructing the children. Children are naturally inquisitive about things, especially about things that father and mother do. These memorials would give the parents an easy opportunity to explain the Lord’s mercy, kindness, and power to rescue His people; and His promise of rescue through His Son, the Savior. They would be a reminder for the adults too. Do we have such memorials markers? The shape of the cross! the cross of our salvation and rescue! For what purpose? *That you may fear [respect/reverence] the LORD your God forever.*

Your journey and your children’s journeys through life are beset by many bumps and detours—some by your own foolish decisions and actions, your own sins. Run to the mighty God of mercy, whose Son is your Rest. He is the One who has, and who will, get you through every chapter of your life to the Trail’s End—with forgiveness and life forever. Aren’t you always waiting for Trail’s End? The end of haying, the end of harvest, the end of calving, the end of seeding, the end of winter long and cold, the end of summer hot and dry, the end of school, the end of the week, the end of your bout with the flu or other sickness; finally even the end of life in this harsh sinful world? In Jesus, God has dried every river for you, even the dreadful river of death. The resurrection awaits at the end of trail. Isaiah similarly writes, *Fear not, for I [God] have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior (Isaiah 41:2-3).* Your Trail’s End is indeed a joy. It ends at home, the Promised Land of Heaven. There is rest from all sin, evil, Satan, and death—rest in Jesus!

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---