**Crossing the Jordan**

**With Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, February 24, 2021

There is one section of the Jordan River Valley which had several really important events in the Bible taking place within a few square miles. It is that small section of the valley upon which we are focusing tonight. Among the Bible personalities in this section are Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus, pretty much a who’s who of the Bible.

The 13th chapter of Genesis first introduces us to the Jordan River Valley. (Genesis 13:1-17) **“***So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. 2 Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. 3 From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier 4 and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord. 5 Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 6 But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. 7 And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. 8 So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. 9 Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." 10 Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain (ha kikkar or disk) of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) 11 So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: 12 Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. 13 Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord. 14 The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. 17 Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."*

Looking down from Bethel and Ai, the Jordan River valley was beautiful and productive and certainly very useful for grazing herds of livestock. Lot would discover although the land was good the people not so much because Sodom and Gomorrah were two of the cities that had serious issues. Dr. Steven Collins has identified Sodom as Tall el-Hammom in Jordan and Gomorrah is identified as Tall Kafrein. The plain of Jordan was compared to Egypt where the Nile created the main green spaces in Egypt just as the Jordan River at high flood stage created similar growing conditions as found at the Nile.

Lot chose the Jordan Valley, crossing the river to be near Sodom, and suffered the consequences of the society near which he lived. The world tends to want to squeeze us into its mold unless we are determined to squeeze the world into God’s mold. We should also not forget that God’s does judge sin, even sexual sin. No matter what society might want to promote God determines morality not a majority of the people. Lot would escape with his family except for his wife who “looked back” and turned into a pillar of salt. When we visit the Jordan River and the Dead Sea from the Jordanian side we can find “Lot’s Cave” and competing claims for the city of Sodom.

I am impressed with the generosity of Abraham. He offered the best to Lot but God’s blessing is better than what might appear best at the moment. Momentary advantage should never be traded for God’s blessing as Easu would also later learn.

Abraham came up from Egypt as did our second major person, Moses. Moses looked down over the **Jordan River Valley from Mt. Nebo** which is the opposite side as Abraham. He certainly wanted to cross over the Jordan but his failures as a leader would keep that from happening. That story is in Deuteronomy 32:48-52 “*On that same day the Lord told Moses, 49 "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. 50 There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. 51 This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. 52 Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel."* NIV

Moses is both a great figure and a sad figure. He was so great so often yet he never received the reward of the Promised Land. He died and God buried him on Mt. Nebo. The place of his grave has never been found. A little later we will see Elijah disappear from about the same spot with no burial place ever found for him either. It is interesting that when Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration the two people who appeared with him were Moses and Elijah, the same two who disappeared near the same spot.

With the death of Moses, Joshua became the leader of Israel who actually crossed the Jordan and entered Canaan, the Promised Land. Josh 1:1-11 tells that story. “*After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: 2 "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them — to the Israelites. 3 I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. 4 Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates — all the Hittite country — to the Great Sea on the west. 5 No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. 6 "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. 7 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." 10 So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: 11 "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your supplies ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own*.'"

Such incredible promises were given to Joshua unlike almost anyone else in history. God said to Joshua, wherever you go, I will give that territory to you. With such a promise why would anyone ever stop walking? Further God said he would never leave him or forsake him. Joshua’s only job was to be strong and courageous and to keep the ways of God. As it turns out, God also said he would never leave us or forsake us so I guess the promises to us were pretty good too!

The crossing of the Jordan would be a miracle. It was in March or April and the Jordan was at flood stage. The river today is literally a tenth of what it used to be since most of the water is extracted from the Sea of Galilee and pumped throughout Israel to supply the country with water. Some water enters from below Galilee but the creeks like the Jabbok are small. The Yarmouk is being similarly diverted by Jordan and Syria. One evidence of how much water is being taken out of the lake and river before it enters its last stretch is in how fast the water of the Dead Sea is dropping. In my lifetime the Dead Sea has gone from fifty miles long down to thirty miles and the water level is dropping about three feet per year. It used to get 160 billion gallons a year, now it is ten percent of that. The resort at Ein Gedi used to be at the shore’s edge. Now it is a quarter mile away. So when we get baptized in the Jordan today the water level is very low and is vastly different from the river Joshua crossed 3400 years ago particularly since Joshua crossed in the spring when the river was a flood stage.

The moment the priests carrying the ark touched the water an invisible dam blocked the flow upstream and dry ground emerged beneath their feet. Here is how Joshua 4:19-24 recounts the story. “*On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. 20 And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. 21 He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' 22 tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' 23 For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. 24 He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."*

When we read these stories, we should get the same message as Israel would get from looking at the stones from the Jordan. God is powerful and everything in heaven and on earth must bow to his command. When you think about your life remember the power of God.

One of the Judges of Israel after Joshua was Ehud (no doubt Ehud Olmert was named after him.) Eglon, the king of Moab was oppressing Israel when Ehud went to pay the necessary tribute. When Ehud got to Gilgal he turned around with a secret message for Eglon which was a double edged knife about 18 inches long which he thrust into the fat belly of the king, killing him. With the oppressive king now dead Israel rose up. Judges 3:28-29 "*Follow me," he ordered, "for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no one to cross over.”* NIV

They seized the fords probably used by Joshua and which would later be used by the next great person, King David. David had a very tragic event happen when his son Absalom rebelled against David forcing him to flee across the Jordan. Leaving Jerusalem David crossed the Kidron and fled up the Mount of Olives and down the long decline into Jericho and then across the Jordan. He went even farther than he did when he fled from King Saul probably going as far as Moab. Troops loyal to David finally brought an end to the rebellion with the death of Absalom whose long hair caught in a tree and he was run through as he hung from the tree.

2 Samuel 19:14-18 has the account of David’s return across the Jordan. “*He won over the hearts of all the men of Judah as though they were one man. They sent word to the king, "Return, you and all your men." 15 Then the king returned and went as far as the Jordan. Now the men of Judah had come to Gilgal to go out and meet the king and bring him across the Jordan. 16 Shimei son of Gera, the Benjamite from Bahurim, hurried down with the men of Judah to meet King David. 17 With him were a thousand Benjamites, along with Ziba, the steward of Saul's household, and his fifteen sons and twenty servants. They rushed to the Jordan, where the king was. 18 They crossed at the ford to take the king's household over and to do whatever he wished.”*

It was roughly 400 years between Abraham and Moses. After another roughly 400 years before King David is seen crossing the Jordan to be restored to his throne. It is a small footnote on history that Gilgal is once again the staging place for the welcoming group as it had been the staging place for Joshua in his conquests and for Ehud in his victory.

I think of David as around 1000 BC having died in 969 BC. Elijah died in 899 BC so only 70 years later. Both Elijah and Elisha had important experiences in this same stretch of land and river **where Elijah and Elisha had crossed over.** 2 Kings 2:5-8 has the story. ‘*The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it." 6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. 7 Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. 8 Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground*.’

This was another miracle of the type that Joshua had at that same place. Those two prophets of God crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire somewhere near where Moses was taken by God. As Elijah was taken up his mantle fell from his shoulders and Elisha picked it up and put it on.

We don’t know exactly what the mantle was. Certainly it was a symbol of his prophetic office but it was also literally a cloak. Elijah did have a distinctive garb as 2 Kings 1:7-8 would indicate. “*7 The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?" 8 They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite."*  That fur coat was so distinctive the king recognized Elijah just from the description. So both Elijah and Elisha wore the same cloak. It definitely set the style for prophets. Zechariah 13:4 "*On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his prophetic vision. He will not put on a prophet's garment of hair in order to deceive*.” When John the Baptist, at that same river 800 years later he was wearing the same kind of clothing thus giving evidence that the mantle had fallen on him too. Matt 3:1-6 “*In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”* But back to Elisha.

2 Kings 2:13-24 13 “*He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. 15 The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. 16 "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley." "No," Elisha replied, "do not send them." 17 But they persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him.”*

Elisha didn’t bother to join them in the search for Elijah because he knew what had happened. So he headed back to Jericho to wait for their return. “*18 When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?" 19 The men of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive." 20 "Bring me a new bowl," he said, "and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. 21 Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, "This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'" 22 And the water has remained wholesome to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.”*

The account comes full circle as Elisha returns to the same place from which our Jordan Valley adventure began, to the same place from which Abraham and Lot looked over the valley. “ *23 From there Elisha went up to* ***Bethel.*** *As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. "Go on up, you baldhead!" they said. "Go on up, you baldhead!"* Elisha said, please, bear with me, or something like that and if you know the scripture you know the story. Two bears mauled 42 punks that day.

We will conclude with the story of Jesus who went down to that same ford in the river to be baptized by John. It was there that he began his ministry as he was washed in the Jordan and anointed with the Holy Spirit and began his role as High Priest of our faith. As such he became the model for the baptism of the Holy Spirit as an essential element of effective ministry.