

Joshua 3:1 ESV (Pg. 103) 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. **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.”

- I. This passage describes one of the most momentous times in the history of the Jews. After 400 hundred years in slavery, God had rescued his people from their Egyptian captors. He had led them through the Red Sea, provided a pillar of cloud to shield them from the blazing desert sun, and a pillar of fire to provide warmth on the cold desert nights. He had given bread from the sky and water from a rock. He had given laws and a tabernacle so that they could approach him in his holiness.
 - A. Yet in spite of all of this, the people grumbled and complained, and turned over and over to idolatry and immorality. But in spite of their stubbornness and rebellion, God brought them to the brink of the land he had promised to them.
 1. There, the people committed the most offensive act; one that cost them dearly. They sent 12 spies into the land, to spy out the good things that awaited them, and to fully appreciate the undeserved blessing of God.
 2. But when they returned, 10 of them reported very little about the good, and painted a bleak picture of the inhabitants of the land, and the fortified cities in which they lived. They convinced the others that they would be defeated, enslaved or killed if they were to enter the land, even though the God who had already done so much for them had promised to give it to them.
 - a) Their sin was unbelief. They knew what God had done already, and what he had promised, and yet they chose not to believe, insulting their God.
 - b) Out of the the 12 spies, only Caleb and Joshua (the subject of the book we read from this morning) maintained their faith in the promises of God.
 - B. Because of this betrayal, God swore in his wrath that none of the perhaps 3 million Israelites would enter the promised land, except for the 2 that believed. When Moses died, God made Joshua the new leader of the people.
 1. Because of this death sentence, they spent 40 long years wandering aimlessly in the desert until everyone over the age of 20 at the time (except for Joshua and Caleb) dropped dead. (That’s like wandering since 1980!)
 2. But now the hour had finally come. They were back at the Jordan River, border of the promised land. They were excited and ready to listen carefully to God’s instruction. So God tells them what to do as they enter the land.
 - C. “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. 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...” The Ark of the Covenant was the golden box that carried the pieces of the 10 Commandments which Moses broke, Aaron’s staff which miraculously budded, and a sample of the heavenly bread which they had eaten for 40 years.

1. More importantly, throughout the history of the Jews, God dwelt above the covering of the ark (Mercy Seat); it represented his power and presence.
 2. God gave them a specific set of instructions with regard to the ark:
 - a) Follow it. No heroes or warriors were to draw swords and lead the way into the promised land. They were to stay back and learn where to go.
 - b) They were to stay 2,000 cubits (3,000 feet) apart from it. "Do not come near it." As God's dwelling place, they were not to hold it in contempt.
- D. For all these strict regulations, God gave them a reason: **"you have not passed this way before."** They were not to make the mistakes that their forefathers had made. God had rescued and preserved them thus far and he had no intention of "tapping out". God was taking them somewhere they had never been, and they must fully rely on him in humble submission in order to succeed in their mission.
- II. It seems to me that there is so much for us to learn from this short little passage. All of us once wandered in the barren wastes of sin before Jesus rescued us. The old life had to die in that desolate place before we could enter into the life of promise.
- A. **Mark 8:35 ESV** *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.* The gospel requires that a man or woman must die to the old kind of life in order to begin a new, eternal life.
1. The Bible calls the new life of a believer a way, path or journey. As a redeemed sinner, you are going to someplace you've never been before. If you are a Christian, this is always the case! You never arrive in this life.
 2. Everyday we are faced with the same choice that the children of Israel had. Will we fear the giants that inhabit the land, or will we trust the God who rescued us from slavery and defeated our enemies: sin, death and the devil?
- B. What does our text have to say to us about how to proceed on our journey?
1. First, we are called to follow not lead. As the ark represented the power and presence of God to the ancient Israelite. Now, God demonstrates his power through the cross, and his presence through by giving the Holy Spirit.
 2. Second, we are not to have such a Spirit of familiarity with God that we take him for granted. Though we have intimacy with God because of what Jesus did, we should never hold him in contempt by getting overly accustomed to him. Knowing God should blow our minds and satisfy our hearts constantly.
 - a) The Bible, prayer, and the saints shouldn't be common and unimpressive to us; rather, we should maintain a respectful distance of reverence in the fear of the Lord; doing this even in the depths of worship and intimacy.
 - b) **Psalm 50:21 ESV** *These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. 22 "Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver! 23 The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!"* Consider these orders:
- C. What does it mean that we are to follow and not lead? Obviously the body of Christ has and needs leaders in it (even Joshua was God's called leader!). But I mean we should avoid the dual sins of self-confidence and presumption.

1. In the Christian life there is a spectrum of wisdom. There is a “common wisdom” (you could even call it “common sense”). This kind of wisdom is what is described most in the book of Proverbs. It includes ideas like “don’t get into debt” and “don’t listen to fools”. It is universal wisdom. You don’t have to be a Christian to understand or benefit from this wisdom.
 2. On the other end is supernatural wisdom. It’s the kind of wisdom that tells you to start building an ark when there isn’t a cloud in the sky, or to get out of the boat in a storm and walk to Jesus. This isn’t “common sense”.
 3. Christ said, **Matthew 11:19b ESV** “Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” (The fruit of an action displays the wisdom of that action.) Sometimes Christians must take steps that make no “common sense”, but yet are proven to be infinitely wise when all the dust settles.
 - a) It is not a bad thing to do what makes sense, but if you boast of being only sensible, never walking out of your comfort zone in risky faith, then you are only **self**-confident, having no confidence in God. Your “wisdom” is a mask for fear and unbelief in God’s written word and proven deeds.
 - b) Conversely, if you only hear voices that you think make you look like a superhero for your great faith (though your leaps of faith usually result in great crashes) you are not a person of great faith, but rather presumption.
- D. So how do we avoid these pitfalls? By following God where he leads. We don’t have the Ark of the Covenant anymore. We have something better. We have the written Word of God. We have the voice of the Spirit. We have the wisdom that resides in the family of God, the Body of Christ. We desperately need all 3.
1. The Word will often give us clear “do this, don’t do that” instruction. But when we can’t find clear instruction for a specific situation, he has given us the guiding voice of the Holy Spirit to lead us in the path of wisdom.
 2. But the third thing on the list is the most overlooked. Most people think that they have a church to hear music and preaching once a week. But God has actually given us the Body of Christ to help us hear God.
 - a) We should get into the habit of saying to our brothers and sisters, “I think I understand what the scriptures say, and I feel the Holy Spirit is leading this way, but what is your take on it? What wisdom can you offer?”
 - b) The Apostles, when asked to give counsel, said in a letter to the people who had asked: **Acts 15:28 ESV** “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.” Our hesitance to trust in the collective wisdom to be found in the community of believers can only be explained by ignorance of what’s available there, sinful pride, or a deeply insecure mistrust of others.
- III. But what about this second instruction, “**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...**”? What is it that God is saying to 21st Century Christians here?
- A. A time came under Saul’s wicked kingship that the ark of the Covenant was captured by their enemies, the Philistines. But they didn’t have it long, because it became a curse to them, so they wanted to get rid of it fast!

1. They loaded it on a cart pulled by two milk cows, and put with it a sacrificial gift of 5 golden tumors, and 5 golden mice (representative of the curses), and they sent it on its way.
 2. The cows were led by God to a place called Beth-Shemesh as a sign to the Philistines, to the field of a man named Joshua. The people of Beth Shemesh were overjoyed. They killed the cows, and made a fire with the wood of the cart to offer sacrifices to God. That's not where the story ends...
- B. **2 Samuel 6:19 ESV** And he (God) struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the Lord. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow. **20** Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?"
1. God had given his people instructions in the law that when the Ark was transported, it was to be covered, carried only by levites and never approached. All these men would have known this. In their celebration, they held the holiness, the power, and the authority of God in contempt every bit as much as the Philistines did when they took the ark. 70 died as a result.
 - a) There are usually 2 types of responses to this story. Some respond with awe and fear (like the survivors), saying, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?". This shows a deep reverence for God's holiness.
 - b) Others think God should lighten up. After all, the men just looked at the ark! In saying this, you show that you have no regard for God's holiness.
 2. This is a real problem in modern Christianity. We've heard so many times how "God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives", that we've begun to think that he is like us. We've grown familiar to the point of boredom.
 - a) Paul describes Jesus as him "who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen". There's nothing common about him!
 - b) The Apostle John fell at his feet as a dead man when he saw him. We yawn our way through the singing of his praise and can barely stay awake while his eternal Word is proclaimed and explained.
- C. None of us have ever gone this way before! In order to know the way, we must not only follow the presence and power of God in the Scriptures, the voice of the Spirit and the congregation of the saints; but we must do so with the highest possible reverence for God's holiness and "otherliness"! He dwells in the highest heaven and the earth is his footstool. We, by contrast, are nothing but dust!
1. Don't misunderstand. God loves his children. He wants to know us. He is a Father who cares for us. But his holiness not to be flippantly disregarded.
 2. You will never know where to go in the Christian life if your view of God is overly familiar. You will only wander aimlessly, or worse, perish in your stubborn pride and self-confidence. Those who bow, proceed and succeed.
- IV. **Communion: 1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this,

as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

- V. **Benediction: 1 Timothy 1:17 ESV** To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.