

# "Confidence in the Living God" Joshua 3-4

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Date: 27 September 2026

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[0:00] Our first reading is Joshua 4, verses 1-7. And Joshua said to them, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you.

When your children ask in time to come, what do those stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. This past spring, Christina and I watched a movie.

It was a critically acclaimed movie. And it was about a young man who had outrageous amounts of confidence, to the point that it was toxic.

It was in some ways watching an accident for like two and a half hours. It was pretty intense. The person with the confidence in himself ended up railroading just about everybody in his life.

[1:36] It was actually a bit of a crazy movie. But it communicated something, I think, very profound. The power that confidence can make.

Somebody who has confidence in their lives, it can be a difference maker. Believing in something or someone can take a person of humble means and elevate them to heights that seem outlandish.

An average person can become extraordinary. But it's important to consider that what's more important than having confidence is what you have your confidence in.

This is what's the key bit in this. What is your confidence in? Who is your confidence in? So this is a question that I want to throw out there this morning.

Hopefully it can sit with us as we open up Joshua chapter 3 and 4. Normally we don't take giant chunks of like two chapters of the Bible.

[2:42] This is 42 verses we're going to be looking at. But it's really one solid act or one solid scene. And it's important that we treat it as one kind of like movement in the story.

So we're not going to read all 42 verses. But be ready to flip back and forth and to follow along. And we're going to read the entirety. Or we're going to take a look at the entirety of this story.

So let me give you a bit of a summary. Because we're not going to read the whole thing. So last week the spies of Israel were told by Joshua.

It was a bit of a covert mission. Listen, cross the Jordan River. They're on the east side of the Jordan. If you can picture ancient Israel. They're on the east side of the Jordan. They cross the Jordan.

They go a bit inland to the city called Jericho. Now it's a walled city. It's a strong city. And these spies, they really get the lay of the land. I'll skip over the whole part about Rahab.

[3:43] A wonderful story. If you weren't here last week, you can listen to the sermon or just read it yourself. But the spies come back. And they come back with a wonderful report for Joshua.

They say, listen, these people, they're strong. They're mighty. Okay. But they are fearful of us. Because God is on our side. So great news.

Israel is going to cross into the promised land. Something that they didn't do 40 years before.

Because they themselves were the fearful ones. But now the tables have turned. They're going to make a move.

They're listening to the Lord. They are trusting in his promises. God is with them. So they are at camp. And Joshua says, listen, it's time. Okay. It's time.

Take up the tent pegs. You know, clean up. Pack up. Let's go to the Jordan. And what we see is that the Lord is going to give very, very specific instructions to get them through the Jordan into the promised land.

[4:47] And really it boils down to this. The priests are going to be told to take the Ark of the Covenant. This box that is, it contains the stone tablets that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai.

He gave the Ten Commandments. If you're familiar with the story, just think Ten Commandments. They're in there. There's also a staff that was used by Aaron, Moses' brother. And the priests were to take this Ark and wade into the Jordan.

Now we're going to see later on that there's something remarkable about the Jordan at this time of year. But they wade into the Jordan. The water is stopped up some like 18 miles north of where they are.

18 kilometers, rather. North of where they are. And the entire people cross the Jordan into the promised land. At the end of it, Joshua says to some key people, he says, listen, we need 12 men, one from each tribe.

As you're going through, pick up a stone off of the riverbed and bring it across the Jordan. I'm going to set up a memorial. And this is, by and large, the big movement of the narrative.

[5:58] So it's just a bit of a summary of the story. So it's a remarkable story. It's actually packed with so much details. I was telling Christine this morning that one of the things you have to do when you're preparing a sermon, you have a lot of good ideas.

And you end up having to go to the editing room and you leave like juicy bits on the editing floor. Like you have to cut out some parts. And I've had to cut out a ton.

And this story is worth your time. It's worth your time to dig in and to read slowly and often. But one thing I want to draw your attention to in Joshua 3 and 4 is how God will give his people confidence. Not confidence in themselves as if they all of a sudden are just in need of a good pep talk, a good shot in the arm, so to speak, so they can recognize how strong of a people they are.

Not at all. He will give them great confidence in him. So we're going to look at this story. I summed it up. So we're not going to look at it necessarily chronologically as it's written, although we will somewhat follow that.

[7:15] Instead, we're going to look at three key things, three key details in the story that actually go beyond this story. And they become themes or types that we see throughout the Bible.

These three things. The ark, the Jordan, and the stones. The ark, the Jordan, and the stones. And again, what is your confidence in?

This is the question that I want to ask as we get into it. So let's look at it, the first point, the ark. We'll read Joshua 3, verses 2 and 6. And this will be on page 14.

At the end of three days, the officers went through the camp 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.

Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about two thousand cubits in length. Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go.

[8:18] For you have not passed this way before. Then Joshua said to the people, Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.

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. Like I mentioned, the ark of the covenant, it's this ornate box.

It has some key objects from Israel's wanderings through the desert. It is very sacred to them. But what is the most important part of the ark of the covenant is what it represents.

And it represents the very presence of God amongst his people. God is everywhere. He's omnipresent. But he chooses a physical means to convey a reality, a spiritual reality to the people. That he is amongst them. That he is their God. And he delights in being with his people. Dwelling with his people. And the ark is this representation of the presence of God.

[9:25] So consider how the Israelites must feel. They have a bit of a different posture going into the promised land than they did 40 years ago.

Nevertheless, one of the biggest things that Israel will have to overcome in the promised land isn't how strong and mighty these people are, but it's their perception of how strong and mighty these people are in light of their own weaknesses and their shortcomings.

So right off the bat, right off the bat, God is going to communicate to his people, I am with you. And more than that, I am going to go before you. It shouldn't be lost on us.

That God is understanding the weakness of the people to give in to their fears. And he is saying, I will go before you.

He asks you a question. What confidence would this give to the average Israelite? Especially thinking, like, is this going to be the same thing that happened with Moses? Okay, we're getting a bit farther than Moses did 40 years ago.

[10 : 33] But it's the same people. Are we going to quake in our boots? Is this going to be a repeat of what happened? And yet the Lord is saying, I will go before you. I'm going to be the strong and mighty one.

Listen to what Joshua continues to say, starting in verse 9 and going to verse 11 of chapter 3. And Joshua said to the people of Israel, Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God.

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.

Behold, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. Did you catch that? The people of Israel will know that the living God is amongst them, and that he will, without fail, he will, not they will, he will, without fail, conquer the land on their behalf.

This is what the Ark is pointing to. This is what God is trying to impress upon his people. That he is the one who is the real strength behind their armor, behind their swords, behind their spears.

[12 : 01] He's the real one, even though they're the ones that are going to go to battle. He is the one who's going to fight. He is the one who is going to give them the land. This is what the Ark is pointing to. In case you potentially don't really buy it, in 42 verses of chapter 3 and 4, the Ark of the Covenant, or the Ark of the Testimony, or the Ark of the Lord, however it is, but the Ark, is mentioned 17 times.

As you read the Bible, just in general, if you see something come up again and again and again, and you ask the question, why is this showing up so often? It's the Lord communicating something to you, to me.

17 times in 34 verses. It's a remarkable repetition that we see here. The Lord is communicating to his people that they are to have confidence, confidence, but confidence in him.

Confidence in his presence as he goes before them. In many respects, the people of Israel will be spectators. God is inviting them to watch and behold and be mesmerized at what he is about to do.

And on the point, interestingly, that this God is the ever-living God, it is a subtle way that Joshua, who is merely a mouthpiece for God, that the Lord is saying, I am the living God, and not their gods, not the Canaanite gods.

[13 : 36] I am the living God. All the other gods are not living. They are false. They are not strong. They are weak. I'll just pause here just for a second, because now we begin to see how this is a timeless portion of scripture for us today, because God is subtly but very clearly communicating to the people, when you find yourself tempted to trust in other gods, they are dead.

And friends, we have this propensity to do that ourselves. To look to other things that promise that they will come through for us.

People that give us guarantees that if we follow them, if we emulate them, if we pay them enough, if we trust them enough, they will come through, that they will be something akin to or greater than the ever-living God.

Notice what God says again. Here, or what Joshua says about God. 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 people in the land of Canaan.

How often do we trust things and think that without fail they will do the things we want? You see, again, the problem isn't about having confidence or not having confidence.

[15 : 05] It's about what our confidence is in. Is your confidence in the right things? In the right people? Or, do you find yourself, if you're being honest, worshipping, not the living God, who without fail will save your souls, but instead a false knockoff, a Timu God, a fake God, a dollar store God.

You know, one of the commentators that I used, he talked about how us, here in the West, we have this problem of, this is his words, not mine, punifying God, making him tiny, reducing him to something completely other than what he is.

And this is, I think, what God is getting at when he says that, that the living God, compared to the other gods, this is, this is who I am. We need to recognize who God is, that he is mighty, and he is the only one that can truly help us.

He is the only one that is able to help us, and he is willing to do so. So, we need to come to him with a proper posture. There's this bit here that it talks about, if we go back in verses two to six, they are to have a great distance between them and the ark, which is, on one hand, this multitude of people, they're kind of going down to a lower part, so the ark literally is their guide, but there is also a holiness factor around the ark, and who God is.

So, that is why Joshua is saying, listen, consecrate yourselves, which is to say, prepare to, to interact with, and experience the holy God.

[16:59] So, don't interact with, with the holy God in a profane way, which isn't to say, profanity, we're swearing, or anything like that, it's just to say, not holy. So, the people are to consecrate themselves, they are to, to ritually clean themselves, and to abstain from profane things.

They are to have the right posture before this God. God will delight in showing up. This is who he is. So, the priests go down into the Jordan, and then we see something remarkable happen, as they wade into the waters. Look with me at verses 14 and 17, and this will be our second point.

Verses 14 to 17 of chapter 3. So, when the people set out from their tents, to pass over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant, before the people, 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, through the time of harvest, the waters coming down from above, stood and rose up in a heap, very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan.

Those flowing down toward the Sea of Ereba, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off, and the people passed over opposite Jericho. Now the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, stood firmly on dry ground, in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground, until all the nations finished passing over the Jordan.

[18:35] The Jordan, interestingly, this little parenthesis here, it's in the flooding season. So for us, I mean, we don't understand how, maybe you do, how kind of the Jordan River works.

In some places, it's a very small river, it's almost like a brook. It would be very easy to ford the river, but in the flooding season, it becomes a very fast-moving river.

It overflows the banks, and the banks, at least in this area of ancient Israel, they were full of brambles. I mean, many of the commentaries I used described it as almost like a jungle.

So not only would the waters flood the banks, but they would hide this overgrown, very difficult area to get through. You need like a machete to make your way through.

And we see that the spies, two young, strong men, they could ford the river. Maybe they went a bit north. Maybe they were just excellent, strong, swimming young men, and they just crossed it.

[19:45] But can you cross a flooded, swollen river with young people, with children, with weak people, with people that are very, very elderly, with a great mass of people?

Joshua, the narrator, is telling us, absolutely not. This is the worst time to cross the Jordan. So, God, what we see here, is choosing to bring Israel across into the Promised Land into such a way as to expose their weaknesses, their physical weaknesses, and more importantly, his greatness. We'll see at the end of chapter 4, the Red Sea is mentioned, but it's important to mention it now. Just as when Israel was weak, they were fleeing Egypt, and they were faced with the Red Sea in front of them, and Pharaoh's army behind them, God brought them through the Red Sea, so too will he bring them through another body of water, the Jordan.

But something else is at play here. I think this is a wonderful thing to consider. The Jordan, this is the first instance where we're going to read about the Jordan having some serious significance in the story of the Bible.

But throughout the Bible, the Jordan River is a bit of a transitional place, a transformational place. So what do I mean? The Jordan is a place in various narratives where people go and they cease to be the same when they leave.

[21:24] In this case, the people of Israel prepare to cross the Jordan, coming out of the Jordan on the other side. Interestingly, in the text, they go in as the people of Israel, but when they come out of the Jordan, the narrative says that they are the nation of Israel.

No longer are they wandering people, but we start to see a nationhood emerge after they come through. They're transformed by going through the Jordan in the same way, similarly, in the Red Sea that they are slaves, they go through and they're freemen on the other side.

But as we continue to read the biblical story, we see other such transitional, transformational actions happening at the Jordan. If you are familiar with the Bible story, some of these names will ring a bell.

Others, if this is new to you, no problem. It just means that you're getting a bit of a snapshot into some future Bible reading. Naaman, he was a wicked king who had leprosy.

He gets cleansed of his leprosy by bathing in the Jordan. Elisha, the prophet, is taken from this earthly life and taken up into heaven.

[22 : 41] Where does this take place? It takes place at the Jordan. And likewise, in that same story, his successor, Elisha, he is blessed with a double portion of spiritual strength.

He comes there less than when he leaves. He is transformed. And most importantly for us, we see John baptizing where?

In the Jordan for the remission of sins. And who comes to get baptized by John the Baptist? But Jesus himself. Okay?

Not that Jesus had sins, but that he so identified with humanity that he was baptized for the remission of sins.

And he comes up out of the water and this voice from heaven declares, behold, this is my son whom I am well pleased. And we start to see the beginning of the new covenant being inaugurated where God is going to transform not just a few people or not just one nation, but all who would come to him.

[23 : 49] So it's not just that the Jordan is this place that just so happens to find itself in various narratives through the Bible. But again, God is helping us to see that he is going to be doing something remarkable, something transforming amongst his people with this body of water.

See, God transforms us. This is the story of Scripture. He is always looking to heal. He is always looking to cleanse.

He is always looking to take individuals and bring them into a family. He is always looking to transform people from death and decay to life and flourishing.

This is what God is doing and we're seeing this in the story. This is who God is. We are seeing his character expressed in his actions. This is what we are called to have confidence in.

This is what we are called, the Israelites are called to see and to recognize. They are no longer a people wandering. They are a nation. And God has done it all. It's incredible.

[25 : 02] He transforms otherwise untransformable people who desperately need transforming. But, we need to also remember that, yes, God transforms, but we have a problem.

We forget what he does. He does some wonderful acts. Maybe you yourselves have had these incredible moments with the Lord in Scripture, at church, where you're just sure, as sure, as sure, that God has showed up in your life.

That you had a heavy heart because of hidden sin, because of the weight of shame, and he had lifted it off of you, and you are light as a feather, and yet, that was way back then, and I can't for the life of me remember what that's like.

And we have a propensity then to, again, going back to our first point, not trust in the ever-living God, but trust in false gods, in Timu gods, in dollar store gods, in that we have this problem of punifying God.

So, what does God do with us who have very faulty memories? He helps us to remember, and this leads us to our third and final point, and we're going to look at the stones.

[26 : 20] Joshua chapter four, verses four to seven, and now we are on page 18. Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe, and Joshua said to them, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you.

When your children ask in time to come, what do those stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. The entire nation crosses.

A remarkable miracle has been done by God. It is a supernatural act, which is just to say that the God who has created heaven and earth, who is the uncreated one, enters into his creation, the natural order of things, and does something supernatural.

And all of Israel goes through and right off the bat, right away, God, anticipating their propensity to forget, says, as you're going through, grab a big stone.

[27 : 51] And we think it's big because they had to hoist it on their shoulder. Get a big stone from the riverbed to the other side, and we're going to erect a memorial to help you remember.

The nation that we are seeing, that is being formed in the story, all of a sudden has a bit of a national history developing. And here's a wonderful thing about memorials.

We still do them today, and they are wonderful. They inform us of what happened in the past. They remind us of what is worth remembering, and call us to action in the present and the future.

Memorials aren't just there to remember the past. They help us. And sometimes the memorials, they remember a horrific event.

If you've ever had a chance to go to Israel, there's a museum called Yad Vashem, and it is a very, very, you don't go there like you're going to go to the science and tech museum.

[28 : 52] It's not a great time. But you go there, and you witness the horrors, you remember the horrors of the Holocaust, and then you leave there, hopefully in such a way as to never want to see them again, that you're willing to fight against evil.

Likewise with Vimy Ridge, the memorial in Vimy Ridge. I've never been there. I've been to Dieppe, and it was very moving. But Vimy Ridge, I've been told by people that have gone there, it is an incredibly somber place to go, and they have intact preserved trenches.

And you go there, and you see the cost of life, and the horrors of war, and the idea is that peace is worth fighting for, and that freedom is not free.

Memorials have this remarkable way of helping us to remember the past, and then acting upon it in the future. You know, that old adage, those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it, I think it rings somewhat true.

I think memorials help us to remember the past. So what we see here, the memorial that Joshua is setting up is similar. It is to remind the people of Israel that their God is the ever-living God, and that he did something so incredibly miraculous, and that if he could stop an entire river in flooding season, in a miraculous way, what are these walls of Jericho really made up to him?

[30 : 29] They're nothing. We'll see soon, in a couple weeks, that that's exactly what they are. That God, if he can do the miraculous, there's nothing, there is nothing that he can't do.

But Israel constantly is forgetting. In fact, Israel's greatest weakness is forgetfulness. That's the biggest impediment to their faith. It is not the Philistines, okay?

It is not Goliath. It is not Assyria. It is not Babylon. It's not Rome. It's their propensity to forget.

They're always forgetting. And when panic sets in, when things scare them, they don't turn to the ever-living God. What do they turn to? They turn to the false gods, the Timu gods, the dollar store gods.

And God says, okay, let them save you. And they don't. And Israel finds itself constantly in a cycle of destruction, and finally they call it to the one true God, and because he is kind and merciful, he acts.

[31 : 36] And then the same cycle happens again. They forget. And friends, this is not just Israel's problem, this is our problem too. It's our problem as well.

You know, the Israelites, they pass through the Jordan, a remarkable thing. They're given a memorial to remember God's mightiest acts. And you know, I'm sure it worked for a time, and then they fell away, and they came back, and they were reminded.

This is what God does. It's an act of his kindness, and he gives us a memorial as well. Every time we gather around the Lord's table, we remember that God the Father sent God the Son to take upon himself human flesh to live and to die, to take upon our sins, to pay the penalty, to be physically crucified, to stay in a grave for three days and rise again to new life, and then ascend to heaven and then give us God, the Holy Spirit, as a down payment and a promise of the incredible glory that awaits us.

This is a memorial so that we leave here, and Monday we get into it with our spouse. We're disappointed by a child. We're frustrated by a co-worker.

There's self-hatred going on in our own lives, and then all of a sudden, Tuesday and Wednesday come, and we have forgotten the ever-living God. Okay? We have forgotten him, and we have confidence, we strive to find confidence in other things, in our self, in our prowess, in our ability to solve problems, and in the end, it might work for a moment, but it will never be an enduring thing that truly solves our problems.

[33 : 35] Will you turn to the ever-living God? Will you remember him? So that when we come on Sunday, we are reminded afresh. It's like a memorial. This is like the twelve stones here, in a way.

We are reminded, hold on a second, we have a God, and Lord, we are sorry for punifying you, for treating you this big, and treating you like you're a dollar store God.

And we come to the table, we hear God's word, and then we come to the table, and we're reminded who it is that fights our battles. Listen, what problems are you not trusting God for?

Where is there hopelessness in your life? What habitual sins and issues and things that frustrate you and bring shame upon your life to no end, what things have you just given up on, and you're not looking to the Lord for help anymore?

Because, you know, the flip side of having confidence in the wrong thing is not having confidence at all and being hopeless. Are you trusting in this one true God, this ever-living God, to fight your battles?

[34 : 45] Friends, he wants to fight them for you. He is eager. He is eager to be trusted. His heart towards you is much stronger than your desire to seek him out.

He wants to cleanse. He wants to transform. He wants to bring you from this earthly frustration to this heavenly city that he has promised you.

Are you trusting him? Will you trust him? Listen, the Israelites are reminded with a memorial, if God can stop the river some 18 kilometers north of us so that we can, as a full people, cross over and become a nation on the other side.

He can fight our battles. But here's the wonderful thing for us to remember. If God did not even withhold his own son, what victory, what prayer will he not answer for you?

What strength will he not give you when you need it to endure suffering? Okay? Listen, hold God to the test. Not in a bad way like Satan tries to tempt Jesus, okay?

[36 : 03] Just to be clear. But hold him to his word. Pray. Ask him for strength. Ask him to show up. Confess to him that you have been punifying him.

You have been treating him small. And that you have given up on victory in your life. faith. You'll show up day in, day out, week in, week out, year in, year out, to church, okay?

Whatever. God might show up. He might not show up. I'm going to go through the motions. That's all I have. Okay. Okay. But confess that to him. And watch what he will do. God the Father has not withheld his only son.

He has suffered in your stead upon the cross to pay for your sins. friends. There is no situation too hopeless. Let us trust in him.