**Crossing the Jordan**

Several states have nicknames for their residents such as Sandlapper for South Carolina residents, a name dating to the Revolutionary War for people who lived in river bottom areas. Tennessee is known as the Volunteer state, a name earned during the War of 1812 due to the large number of Tennesseans who volunteered to fight the British. Most people have heard of the Oklahoma Sooners because that is the name of the football team of the University of Oklahoma, but I think few people are familiar with how the state became known as the “Sooner” state. In 1889, many people traveled to the territory of Oklahoma to stake land claims. The federal government owned about 2 million acres of land that was to be parceled off beginning on April 22, 1889. On that day, 50,000 people lined up for a race to claim their piece of land by establishing boundary markers. This was so widely anticipated that many people illegally entered the territory and marked their claims ahead of that date thus becoming known as Sooners. I guess better a Sooner than a Later but it is odd that the people of Oklahoma have embraced such a disparaging name. Perhaps they identify with those early settlers who were so eager to enter their new home they could not wait for the appointed date. In our study of Joshua chapters 3&4, we read the Israelites finally reached their goal. After enduring 40 years of wandering the desert, they came to the Jordan River which was the boundary of their property and they had to wait 3 more days before entering. There is no documented evidence that there were any “Sooners” who could not wait and went ahead of their countrymen. The raging river and the unknown of what waited on the other side may have convinced the more adventurous that safety in numbers was the more prudent approach.

Chapter 3 begins with the Israelites leaving Shittim where they had been for an extended period. They left there and camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. After 3 days, the officers told the people in the camp that they were to follow the ark which was to be carried by the priests. Prior to that when the tribes moved they were led by the pillar of cloud and fire which indicated God’s presence with them. Since the ark was God’s earthly throne, it led their way toward Canaan rather than being in the middle of the procession of tribes as previously. Joshua told the Israelites to consecrate themselves just as Moses told them when he prepared them to enter into the covenant with God (see Ex. Chapter 19).

God told Joshua that He would exalt him before the people to demonstrate His presence with Joshua just as He had been with Moses. He told Joshua to instruct the priests to carry the ark into the Jordan River which would have been at flood stage due to heavy spring rains. Just as God had done at the Red Sea, He parted the waters of the river the instant the priests entered the river and He made the ground dry. All the tribes crossed over while the priests remained in the middle of the river bed. Note that the men of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh went ahead of the other tribes (see Num. 32:17, Deut. 3:18 and Num. 1:23, 25 and 35). In chapter 4, Joshua instructed the people to choose 12 men from among the tribes who would each take a stone from the river to erect a memorial at their camp on the western side of the river. After all the tribes had gone to the other side, God told Joshua to have the priests carrying the ark to come out of the river at which it returned to its flow. They camped at Gilgal which was about 8 miles north of Jericho. Joshua told the people that the stone memorial was to remind the people of future generations that God had dried up the Jordan River just as He had done at the Red Sea so the people could safely cross. The Canaanites knew that God had parted the Red Sea and news of this latest miracle would have certainly quickly spread throughout Canaan.

The ark is mentioned 17 times in these 2 chapters, emphasizing the presence of God that was with the Israelites as they entered the promised land. Joshua’s tenure as their leader saw little of the strife experienced by Moses as he dealt with constant grumbling and outright rebellion. It could be that the younger generation had witnessed the consequences their parents had experienced and the ark reminded them of who was leading them.