



Joshua 3-4 Memorial Stones

When we open the book of Joshua we find ourselves in the middle of the story of God fulfilling His promise to give the descendants of Abraham a place to live. They're the people of Israel, in the land that we call Israel today. Back then it was known as Canaan, but the Jews also referred to it as The Promised Land because that's what it was to them – the land God had promised to give them.

It was going to be a place where they lived in constant awareness of their identity as a people specially chosen and called by God for His purposes. That was to be central to their identity – they were to be God's chosen people in God's chosen place.

They had just spent 400 years in Egypt, most of it as slaves to the Egyptians, and had used Moses to lead them to freedom. Then, after Moses died, Joshua was commissioned as the leader of the nation, and he would be the man God used to bring the people into the Promised Land. We saw all of that in the first sermon on Joshua 1.

In Joshua 2 the whole story stopped so we could meet Rahab – she'll come up again soon. Now we're in Joshua 3 and God gives the command to move out – it's time to enter the heart of the Promised Land.

But first, there's a bit of a problem – they're on the wrong side of a river over a thousand years before the Romans invented bridges. If you're familiar with The Little House on the Prairie series you remember Laura's family had to wait for winter so they could cross the rivers when they were frozen, because even a few hundred years ago in America we didn't have bridges like we do today. Unfortunately, Joshua was in the Middle East, which is nowhere near the Midwest; so waiting for the river to freeze in winter isn't an option.

And, there's a LOT of people, estimates are about 2 Million, so anytime there's an obstacle in your path it's going to be a big pain getting them over, around, or through it unless God shows up and does something miraculous, which He does.

Joshua 3:1 Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over.

When we pick things up the children of Israel are on the western side of the river. They pack up and move closer to its banks, but there's no way over it or through it.

It was springtime and the snow that had fallen over in the mountains of Lebanon in winter was now melting, flowing down the mountains, and flooding the river. It was least 90-100

feet wide, about 10 feet deep, with a turbulent muddy flow and it was surrounded by a thicket of brush and trees kind of like the mess down here at the edge of our property. You could probably get a few strong swimmers across, but getting the nation across with all its people and materials was going to be an enormous challenge. And, where are you going to find strong swimmers in a nation of people that have grown up in the desert?

So picture the scene: over there in the distance, within eyesight, was the Promised Land – the place and the experience that they had been waiting for. They could see the blessing God had been promising, but also the impossibility of getting there.

Ever feel that way?

Do you ever feel like you're separated from the things that God has for you by a frustrating obstacle in your path? Do you ever feel like your life could be so much better if only you could get over, or around, or through, this one thing?

What's your river without a bridge? And what have you tried to cross it?

Well, let me tell you something – Joshua didn't make it happen on his own. He didn't call for the Corps of Engineers to come up and figure out a solution, they didn't use bridges or barges or boats. God had something else in mind this time, a way of helping them remember that He was with them, that He was leading them, and that while yes, they were facing a very real obstacle, He was also a very real God.

Watch what happens next:

Joshua 1:2 So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp; 3 and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it.

You know what the ark of the covenant was, right? Indiana Jones set off to find it in Raiders of the Lost Ark.

No, actually God had told Moses to have it built as a symbol of His presence among the people. It was a trunk, made out of wood that was covered in gold, that could be carried by four people and it was the central piece of the tabernacle, the place where people would come to sacrifice and worship God. Inside the trunk were the tablets that contained the Ten Commandments, Aaron's staff that had miraculously budded as evidence that God had called him to be the High Priest, and a pot of manna, the miraculous food God had been giving them while they waited for forty years in the desert for this day to come when God would finally lead them into the Land.

The Ark of the Covenant was the primary symbol of God's presence among His people. And now the people are being told, follow that symbol – follow that symbol of God's presence,

because God is going to lead us where we're supposed to go. He's going to take care of this obstacle that is separating us from where He wants us to be.

Joshua 3:4 Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed *this way before*."

Friends, that's worth noticing – follow the symbol of God's presence "**for you have not passed this way before**." Those words are going to be relevant time and time again in your life.

You will face all kinds of things that you've never had to deal with before. Some of you youth start high school next year, or middle school. Some of you families are going to be moving. Some of you are still trying to figure out this marriage thing, or this parenting thing, or this taking care of your own aging parents thing. *You've never passed this way before*. This is new territory. What are you supposed to do?

Keep your eyes on God. Follow Him. When He moves, let Him lead you. You don't have to figure this out alone. You've got a guide.

And really, it's been like this all along, hasn't it? There have been other times when you didn't know what it was going to be like, or how it would turn out. There have been other times when you didn't know what to do, and He led you. God showed up and led you, strengthened you. He was your guide, your shepherd, your rock, your strength.

And sometimes it happened in very direct ways. I think of a man I know and greatly respect – he was trying to make it through one of the land navigation phases of Special Forces training and he was turned around and disoriented, frustrated, knowing how much of his future hung on his ability to complete this task. So he prayed, "God show me where to go," and he came back out into the open and practically stumbled into his next check point.

Now, your story might not be as immediate and tangible, but there's no doubt about it, God will lead you, and He will lead you into and safely through places you have never passed through before, just keep your eyes on Him.

5 And Joshua said to the people, "**Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.**"

The word "wonders" is the same word used to describe the ten plagues God brought on Egypt. Something big is about to happen. So tell me, how well do you think people slept that night? "**Tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.**" NBD. No big deal. Have you tried putting the kids to bed on Christmas Eve? How well do you sleep the night before a big trip?

But first, the people are told to sanctify themselves, to specially prepare themselves for an encounter with God. That's a good reminder for us as well. Christian, if you are trying to seek God is it possible that you're having a hard time hearing Him because other things in your life are crowding out His voice? Is it possible that there's so much noise and 'commitments' in your life that you struggle to hear? What is the evidence in your life that you are sanctified, set apart, for God. How does being a Christian make your life look any different? "Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you."

6 Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people."

So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.

7 And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. 8 You shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.' "

9 So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God." 10 And Joshua said, "By this you shall know..."

You might want to underline that in your Bibles, because God is telling them *why* these things are happening. Things are going down this way for a reason: God wants to teach them something in the midst of it all.

It's "By this," by this seemingly impossible circumstance, and the miraculous deliverance you're about to see, "by this you shall know"

...that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites: 11 Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan.

So did you catch that? God has let these impossible circumstances come into their lives SO THAT they will know God is among them. And they're going to face even greater challenges over the coming days, weeks, and years. Just like you and me. Life never gets totally easy, does it? There are seasons where things seem to flow well, but issues always seem to crop up again. There are more battles to fight, more obstacles to navigate in life. And God is doing *this* thing for the Israelites so that they will have confidence for the *next* thing.

Doing this little miracle of crossing the Jordan is God's way of assuring them that He is there, that He sees and knows, and that they can trust Him.

It's an important lesson for them to learn, and one that we need to learn as well: *God works in our lives today so that we can trust Him even more tomorrow.* The faith of the past is fuel for the future.

12 Now therefore, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe. 13 And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, *that* the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap.”

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.

So the priests who carried the ark walked out into the water, and as they did, the waters began to dry up. It says they were stopped up “very far away at Adam.” That’s about 18 miles to the north according to archaeologists and would give plenty of room for the people to cross over for the first time into the land God had promised. God made a way for them to receive what God wanted to give.

Think about that. God made a way for them to receive what God wanted to give. What He did was unexpected, and it happened 18 miles away, out of sight, they didn’t understand how He did it, or why He chose to do it this way, but they knew they had just experienced a miracle of God.

Now, there’s still a lot of work to do. They’ve still got to fight some battles; they’ve still got to travel. And then they’ve got to settle into the land. It’s not like God just flips a switch and everything is great – even in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, before sin, Adam still had work to do, but he knew, and the people of Israel knew, and you and I can know, that God is with us, and that He is the one making a way.

He’s not parting rivers. He had only done it once before and He’s never done it since, but that’s kind of the point of miracles as we’ll see. God does something tremendous and then He wants us to remember it and tell the story.

1 And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying: 2 “Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from every tribe, 3 and command them, saying, ‘Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.’ ”

So Joshua passes on what he’s just received from God:

4 Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; 5 and Joshua said to them: "Cross over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, 6 that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones *mean* to you?' 7 Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever."

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.

10 So the priests who bore the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the LORD had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua; and the people hurried and crossed over. 11 Then it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over, that the ark of the LORD and the priests crossed over in the presence of the people. 12 And the men of Reuben, the men of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses had spoken to them.

13 About forty thousand prepared for war crossed over before the LORD for battle, to the plains of Jericho. 14 On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they had feared Moses, all the days of his life.

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.

19 Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth *day* of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. 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."

When the day started they were on the East side of the Jordan River, now they're on the West. That day, they saw a miracle.

And while the waters were parted, they were told to send a representative from each of the tribes to grab a rock from what was usually the bottom of river, and Joshua used them to build a memorial. A physical, tangible, symbol of what God had done so people would not forget. I think that's important for us to think about. God could have just gone on doing miracles all the time, but He had a different plan. He did this one thing and then said, now build a memorial so that people will ask what happened.

He was intentionally provoking people to remember. The pile of stones was supposed to prompt retellings of history. We understand that, don't we? Living in the shadow of our nation's capital we see monuments all over and they're intentional; they're there for a reason, to remind us of what has happened. We see millions of people come stare at them every year telling each other the story of George Washington, of Lincoln, of Martin Luther King Jr. and his famous dream, of the horrors of Vietnam and the sacrifices of Arlington.

These are places made of stones in our city so that we will know and remember and pass along the stories of what has happened. And that's what God wants us to do with His stories too.

So Christian, let me ask you a very important question. What memorials are you building in your life? If you know God, if you have seen Him move in mighty ways, if He has been your hope, your salvation, your provider, your comfort, your refuge, your strength, what are you doing to steward the story? What are you doing to provoke others to ask – what does this mean?

I know of a family that had an actual collection of rocks – memorials, each with a specific story of something God had done. Or consider the military: all of the military branches have flags, and on their formal flag poles hang campaign streamers – reminders of campaigns, wars, battles, actions they have participated in. They preserve the stories. What about you?

It's a very personal question, but I want to encourage you individually and as families, to consider – what are your memorial stones? How do you remember the things God has done in your life? For your own sake – there are times when you need to remember Who He is and what He has done, you need to know that He is with you as you fight the battles of this life, you need to remind yourself of prior faithfulness for future fights.

But also, for the sake of the next generation – these stones were supposed to provoke people to ask: what's that all about? And when that question was asked it was helpful to the person who told the story and the person who heard the story – they were both made aware of what God had done: the situation seemed difficult, or impossible, but the presence of God led the way and when people followed, a miraculous solution appeared.

Friends, this is what God does. You know that. Many of you know that. But you need to remember that. And you need to provoke others to ask about that. We need to follow God's leading at all times in our lives, trusting Him to lead us into and through even what

seems, at first, to be impossible situations and then, when we come out on the other side, to find some way to make sure the memory never fades.

And one of the things that we need to remember, and provoke people to ask us about is the what He has done over the past year in bringing together two churches in an incredible spirit of unity. And if you look around you get the sense that's only just beginning. We're in the process of repairing the walls like Nehemiah, preparing for what God wants to do next in this place. The building isn't the church, people are the church, but the building gives us a space to meet and minister to one another. So we're making some changes that enable us to do that better, but we expect that greater things are yet to come as God uses us to call people into to know and worship Him here with us.

Friends, as I told the elders recently, we need to remember what we have seen God do on this hill. It's a big deal. It's a bona fide miracle. A little ways back in our lives was a River Jordan, and some wondered if there was any way to cross it, and God showed up and led us through. We have seen a work of God in the marriage of these churches, and we need to remember it.

This morning we're also going to remember something else. The cross of Christ. He gave the children of Israel a pile of stones to remember the crossing of the river, but he's given us the bread and the cup to remind us of Calvary. We will hold in our hands a physical reminder of a spiritual truth, the greatest miracle ever performed, when our sins were exchanged for Jesus' righteousness and holiness. And Jesus told us, this do, as often as you do it, in remembrance of Me.

Friends, God wants us to remember who He is, what He has done, and He wants us to look to Him to get us through the things that seem impossible in our lives. The Israelites were separated from the Promised Land by a river, we were separated from Heaven by Sin, and today, in some ways, some of us are still separated from what God has for us by some obstacle in our path. In every case, the answer is the same – get your eyes on God, follow where He leads, receive what He provides, and walk in faith and trust. God knows the way and He's calling us to follow.