

## THE TWELVE STONES

Joshua 4:1-24

Key Verse: 4:23

*“For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over.”*

There is a circle of huge ancient stones standing on the Salisbury Plain in England. It is known as Stonehenge and attracts many tourists. Who built this ancient monument and why? It's a mystery. Joshua Chapter 4 tells us about two stone monuments built by the Israelites right after their crossing of the Jordan River. But we know exactly why and how they were built. It was a reminder for God's grace for them. It was to teach them a sense of God's history. Today, let us think about the importance of having a sense of God's history.

### I. JOSHUA OBEYS GOD'S COMMAND (1-5)

The crossing of the Jordan River was one of the most remarkable events in Israel's history. Joshua and his people must have felt like having a great party to celebrate their crossing. As soon as the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, however, the Lord commanded Joshua, *“Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight”* (2-3). God knew that it wasn't easy for them to cross the Jordan. The 1-million-plus people with their elderly and children, along with their animals and possessions, crossed the river all day long. They were exhausted. It was time to relax a little bit. But God did not want them to be complacent at this time. There was one more thing to be done before the priests could come out of the river. Look at verses 2-3 again. The Lord said to Joshua, *“Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.”* Joshua perhaps wondered at first why God told them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan where the ark of God had been. Joshua was very tired. All the people were very tired. In this situation, to take up twelve stones from the middle of the river and carry them over to Gilgal was not easy. But Joshua did not complain. He did not question about the timing. He simply obeyed God's command, because it was the word of God.

We learn from Joshua what it means to obey the word of God absolutely. How could he obey God's command for things that he did not like to do, if indeed this were the case? The other day, Shep. Dream Sherrill expressed her fear of talking to students on campus to invite them to Bible studies. We understand this very well. No one likes to be rejected. Why do we have to bother people when we don't know them and we don't owe them anything? But I know that Dream will still talk to them and invite them to the word of God. Why? It is because of what the Lord Jesus told her. Jesus said, “Do you

love me? ... Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:17). Jesus says in John 14:15: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” If we love the Lord, we can obey his command even if we don’t like what he tells us. We love God and we love Jesus. We love because he first loved us (1Jn 4:19). But how can we show our love for the Lord? If we really love the Lord, we ought to show our love by obeying his command, as Joshua did. May God help us to obey his word absolutely, even when we don’t like what he tells us to do!

## II. TO SERVE AS A SIGN AMONG YOU (6-13)

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, “Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder.” The Israelites had just crossed the river which was in flood stage. So the twelve men were probably wondering why they had to go back into the river again. What if the water in the upstream suddenly breaks? They would be swept away to the Salt Sea and become pickled food for some sea creatures. Joshua realized that it was time for them to know the spiritual significance of taking the stones out of the riverbed at this particular time. So he told them in verses 6-7. “...to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”

God had done a great miracle for his people when he stopped the flow of the Jordan so that the whole nation could cross it as on dry ground. It was by the grace of God that they crossed the river onto the promised land. And now God wanted them to remember the grace by setting up a stone memorial. They were to use the memorial as an educational tool to teach their children about the grace of God. The memorial would be a reminder for them how God kept his promise faithfully. He even stopped the flow of the Jordan River! The memorial would also help them to trust God in their future. As they faced an uncertain future in their upcoming battles with the Canaanites, they would do well by remembering the grace of God that enabled them to cross the Jordan as on dry ground. The stone memorial would be their reminder to have a sense of history.

Look at the last part of verse 7: “*These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.*” Joshua set up two stone memorials, one in the middle of the river (9) and the other in Gilgal (20), which was to become an important place in their conquest of the promised land. Gilgal was located a mile and a half east of Jericho, about five miles west of the Jordan River.



During our trip to Turkey, we saw two strange monuments standing near the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. One was an Egyptian obelisk of Pharaoh Tutmoses. The other was “the Serpent Column” which was an ancient Greek sacrificial tripod. These monuments were moved to Constantinople by Roman Emperor Constantine from Egypt and Greece. They look impressive, but I wondered why they were there, other than they

generate tourist dollars for Turkey. Unlike these monuments, the twelve stone memorial the Israelites set up had a clear meaning and a purpose. It was a sign to help them to remember who God is.

We need our personal memorial in our life of faith. God has led us through our wilderness in his grace. He enabled us to cross the Jordan by his grace. We all have memorials by which we can remember the grace of God. Some memorials may be invisible like the one Joshua set up in the middle of the Jordan. It is under water and you cannot see it but you know it is there. Other memorials are like the one set up in Gilgal that constantly reminds us of the grace of God. For example, the death of his close friend helped Josh to think about the fragile nature of life, through which he turned to God more seriously. The challenges of her visa interviews and RN exams became a stone memorial for Msn. Deborah through which she remembers God's faithfulness. A serious auto accident became Msn. Pauline Hwang's memorial, reminding her of the grace of God. My first summer Bible conference was one of the several events that turned my life around. So Bible conferences are a stone memorial that reminds me of God's grace. Likewise, we have a person, an event, or a scripture verse that reminds us of the love of God. I pray that this very retreat or the key verse testimony you shared may become a memorial in your life of faith.

Even if you cannot think of a personal memorial at this moment, we all have one wonderful memorial in our hearts. It is the cross of Jesus. The cross used to be a symbol of shame and guilt as it was used to punish criminals. But ever since Jesus died on the cross, it has become a symbol of his love for sinners like us. To some people, the cross may be just another ornament they can use as a necklace or a bumper sticker. But for those who truly know Jesus personally, it is a symbol of his amazing love for us. We also have bread and wine that Jesus gave us as a remembrance of his flesh and blood. At the Last Supper before his crucifixion, Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me" (Lk 22:19).

Why is it important for us to have a personal monument? For one thing, we are forgetful. We easily forget the grace of God and become proud before him. As time passes, we tend to forget even some very intense experiences in life. The joy and excitement of meeting Jesus personally the first time can become a fading memory with the passing of time. We are often preoccupied with our daily grind and forget about what God did for us. When we forget the grace of God, we also become fearful and anxious about our future. Serving the work of God becomes a burden. We lose the joy of serving our Lord Jesus. You get the idea. The point is not about a memorial *per se*, whether made of stone or wood. It is about remembering the grace of God. It is about having a sense of God's history. Realizing this, St. Paul always praised the grace of God whenever he wrote letters to Christians. He had a memorial in his heart that reminded him of God's grace whenever he opened his mouth. May God help us to have biblical memorials that can help us to remember the grace of God and to keep our focus on our personal relationship with God! May God help us to have a sense of history so that we may trust in God and his promises in all situations!

After hearing from Joshua the historical significance of the stone memorial, the Israelites did as Joshua had commanded. “They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down” (8).

### III. THE LEADERSHIP OF JOSHUA AND THE PRIESTS (14-18)

Look at verse 14. *“That day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him all the days of his life, just as they had stood in awe of Moses.”* When Joshua loved God and obeyed his command, God exalted him again before all his people. We learn here that a leader is exalted by God when he obeys God’s command. Then he is recognized by people. There are many kinds of leaders in this world but true leaders are those who are recognized by God through their love of God and obedience to his word. Moses and Joshua did just that. God exalted Joshua, not only for his effective leadership in crossing the Jordan but also for showing his love for God by obeying his command.

Look at verses 15-17. *Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Command the priests carrying the ark of the covenant law to come up out of the Jordan.” So Joshua commanded the priests, “Come up out of the Jordan.”* After all the people completed the crossing and after the stones were carried out of the river bed, the priests were finally told to come up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant. *No sooner had they set their feet on dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before* (18). We can imagine how relieved they felt when they finally came out of the river. Watching the water gushing down, the priests must have had a sigh of relief. Cold sweat must have run down their backs.

Once again, it is worthwhile to think about the faith of the priests who were carrying the ark of the Lord. They were standing in the middle of the river until all the Israelites completed their crossing. It must have taken a long time for that many people to cross the river. Afterwards, the twelve leaders, one from each tribe, came back and carried twelve stones out of the river on their shoulders from the place where the priests were standing with the ark of the Lord. The priests were the first ones to step into the water of the Jordan. It was a terrifying moment when they had to step in the river, but they overcame their fear by faith. And they had to stand patiently in the middle of the river until all the other people passed through.

God wanted the Israelites to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6; 1Pe 2:9). He wanted to use them as his servants to save the sinful humanity. A priest is one who helps people to come to God. Jesus is our high priest. We are his little priests. Jesus is our Chief Shepherd (1Pe 5:4). We are his little shepherds. We can learn several things from the priests in this passage. A shepherd must have the faith and courage to step into the river first, carrying the ark of the covenant. By faith he must go ahead of his sheep by setting good examples. Next, a shepherd must be patient in doing God’s work. When all the Israelites completed their crossing, it was natural for the priests to want to come out of the river immediately. But they waited for Joshua’s command to come out. They stood firm in the middle of the river, overcoming their fear and anxiety by faith in

God. Finally everything was completed. Joshua commanded them to come out of the Jordan with the ark of God. The priests endured the long waiting. They showed their courage by standing firm in the middle of the river until everything was completed. May God help us to learn the faith of the priests in this passage!

#### IV. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN (19-24)

Look at verses 19-20. *“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. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.”* Joshua realized that in order to conquer the promised land they would have to fight many battles ahead. The first thing Joshua did was to set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. It was God who enabled them to cross the Jordan. The crossing of the Jordan gave them the confidence they needed to conquer the promised land. As an expression of his faith in God, he set up the twelve stones taken from the Jordan. It was a symbol of God’s victory. It was a symbol of the promise that God would lead them to the promised land if they depended on him by faith.

Look at verses 21-24. *He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. 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.”* Joshua told them that the stone memorial was not only for the current generation but also for the generations to come. It was to teach a sense of God’s history to his descendants. And it wasn’t just for the Israelites. Verse 24 says: *“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.”* We learn that we must teach the history of God to our children and young people in our generation, no matter who they are, so that they may know our God is God.

God knew Joshua and his people were very tired after crossing the Jordan. But God did not wait until later to teach them a sense of history. What is history? It is “his story”—the story of God. Without God there is no history. Only God’s history is the true history. Of course, human beings are included in history. But without God, man’s history is the history of people struggling to survive and then disappearing like the morning mist. I like history. One thing I miss from not having cable TV is that I don’t get to watch the History Channel. European history is especially fascinating because they have long history and many things happened. But we can simply sum up all the stories by saying that people were born, they struggled, and then they died. But God’s history is different, because his story does not end with the demise of a monarchy or a kingdom or a king. God is eternal. His kingdom lasts forever. God’s history continues beyond our life and death. So the people of God must have a sense of God’s history. How can we have a sense of God’s history? We can learn to have a sense of history of God by studying Bible. And the Bible teaches us the truth that all history points to our Lord Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, we learn that God wants his people to remember his grace and love. May God help us to have personal memorial in our hearts by studying the word of God faithfully! We also learn that we have the responsibility to teach our children, our young students, so that they may also have a sense of history.