

One Faithful Step At A Time. Joshua chapters 3-4

Portions adapted from: Remembering What God Has Done Series by John Hamby @ Sermon Central.Com

There was a man named John -- not necessarily anyone you might know -- who had a really terrible memory. One day John ran into a friend whom he had not seen in a long time. He greeted him & said, "*Bill, do you remember what a bad memory I had?*" Bill answered, "Yes, I certainly do." "*Well, it's not bad any more. I went to a seminar that taught us how to remember things. It was a great seminar, & now I have a wonderful memory.*"

Bill answered, "That's great! What was the name of the seminar?" "Well," John said, "*wait a minute, my wife went with me. I'll ask her.*" He turned & saw his wife nearby. Then he turned back to Bill & said, "*What's the name of that flower with a long stem & thorns & a red bloom?*" "Do you mean a rose?" Bill answered, "Yeah, thanks," John said, "*Hey, Rose, what's the name of that seminar we attended?*"

Today's message is about both doing and remembering. God realizes that we often forget what He has done for us. Given our propensity to forget, it is little wonder then that memorials have frequently played an important role in biblical history. Such as the stone altar that Moses built at the foot of Mt. Sinai to commemorate God's covenant with Israel (Ex. 12:14).

Then as he had done many times before, once again just before they entered the promise land, Moses issued a final warning to Israel, "*beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt...*" (Deuteronomy 6:12).

So, now having crossed to the other side of the Jordan River, at God's command, Joshua had the people build two 12 stone monuments commemorating and marking the location of their Jordan river crossing, to be for *the Israelites a memorial for ever* (4:7). The meaning of that Hebrew word is "**to remember.**"

Today's story thus has two important lessons to teach us:

First, when God commands, we need to step out in faith

And second, in the future when we begin to doubt, or take God for granted, we need to remember those times when God led and we followed. Which brings up the question, **What kind of memorials do we have in place to help us remember when we followed God, one faithful step at a time?**

There is also a third lesson God intended in this river crossing, but it was specifically to help establish Joshua's unquestionable leadership as God now did through him, what He formerly had only done through Moses, so that the people would faithfully follow Joshua perhaps even better than had followed Moses. For the people of Israel that day, the key verse is

On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.
Joshua 4:14

But also for the people of Israel in the future and for their children, it would be the stone monuments standing both in the river and at Gilgal that would be reminders of what God had done for them that day. Thus, this story is a lot more important for us to understand than the amount of attention we formerly gave it in Sunday School. So let's begin.

As chapter 3 opens, Joshua is ordering Israel to prepare for the next day's crossing of the Jordan River; which we will quickly learn will be no small feat.

1. Because the number of people in the Israeli camp was far larger than I had earlier said. According to the Book of Numbers, when they arrived at the Jordan River, Israel had an army not of 200,000, but rather 601,730 fighting men. This would make an estimate of the total population of the Israeli camp to be somewhere around 2.5 million people (Numbers 26:51). While some commentators have challenged this large a number on the basis of the wilderness' inability to sustain such a population, I see no reason to doubt what the Bible carefully recorded. However, the point here is that getting 2.5 million people to move anywhere is a major task in itself.
2. Next, the Jordan was in its springtime flood stage. This river which was usually less than 100 yards wide had now left its banks to become a one mile wide swiftly moving torrent. I am sure that the Jerichoans' were convinced there was no way that Israel was getting across that river until it subsided, which probably helped them sleep a bit easier those evenings.

For the next part of this story's sake, it is important to notice that God was only speaking through Joshua, telling him when and what to say. God would provide the miracle, but the people would hear the voice of Joshua calling the shots. Thus as we noted earlier, causing the Israelis to transfer their faith to Joshua's ability to lead.

Now let's get to the river crossing itself. Joshua had sent the priests with the Ark of the Covenant marching on ahead, with the entire Israeli camp following them at a sacred distance. Joshua said that when the sole of the priest's feet touched the water, the river would divide to let them pass. According to Scripture this division actually began with the river standing up in a heap some 20 miles upstream from the spot where they had been told to cross. Thus while the people watched, as far as they could see both upstream and downstream, the river just ran dry providing quite a large area for 2.5 million people to quickly and safely cross on solid ground.

So the first miracle the Israelis' witnessed under Joshua's command – reminiscent of their Red Sea crossing – was the barrier to their Promised Land, as far as they could see, opening wide for them. Even so, Scripture records that when they crossed the river bed, they did so in haste (4:10).

After the water ran down, the priests with the Ark then walked to the middle of the river where they stopped and stood *on dry ground* to let the people pass in front of them.

Once the people were safely across, Joshua sent men back into the middle of the river bed to gather 12 large stones which they were to carry some five miles to a place called Gilgal, where the people were to camp for the evening. Next scripture records that Joshua gathered 12 more stones from the bank, which he then took to the middle of the river bed to build a second monument in front of where the priests were still standing. Then Joshua called for the priests to come up out of the river bed and as the soles of their feet touched dry ground, the waters closed up behind them; probably with just the top of that mid-river monument sticking up out of the flood waters.

That evening the Israelis' set up camp and built their second "memorial" at Gilgal, which was just two miles away from Jericho. Can you imagine what went through the heart and mind of those in Jericho that day? The morning had begun with them thinking that they were at least protected for the season by the flooded Jordan, only to look over their walls that evening to find 2.5 million Israelis' camping right on their doorstep.

Sitting on that north/south trade route, Gilgal thereafter served as the base camp for Joshua's conquest, both of Jericho and the surrounding region. Then in the future, Gilgal, with its stone memorial reminding them of all that God had done for them, became an important gathering place to which Israel would return to commemorate special events.

One more important thing to notice from this story, is that the day the people of Israel walked across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, was exactly forty years to the day from when they first walked out of Egypt. Coincidence? With God there are no coincidences.

Now let's talk a bit about the value of building similar memorials. Notice three reasons that were given for the Israelis memorial stones.

FIRST, IT WAS TO BE A PLACE BOTH FOR ISREAL AND THE WORLD TO REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAD DONE. Joshua told the people "*these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.*" (v. 7)

The memorial stones would remind **the Israelis' of their own personal experience**; what they saw, heard and felt that day. Notice that in verse six, the memorial would cause their children to ask; "*What do these stones mean to you?*" "*Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.*" (4:7)

Whether you realize it our not, we all have such memorials in our lives, not necessarily monuments of stone, but ones built of memories. There are **places** that trigger memories for you, just as did the memorial stones in Gilgal.

For me there was Oak Hills Christian College on the shores of Lake Marquette in Bemidji Minnesota, where several wise and patient teachers helped grow my faith from a narrow minded fundamentalism to a more warm hearted evangelicalism. This will always be a special place for reminding me of so many good things that God had done in my life. You no doubt also have such a place in your life: Camp Massanetta, Montreat, or the church you grew up in?

There are also memories of **people** whom God has used in your life. For me many of these memories are of the people who supported my journey towards Christian ministry, generously opening their homes and their lives to help this young student grow as he pursued the education needed to be a good pastor. But how often do we sit down to recall these memories and thank God for the people He placed in our lives?

There are also memories of **events** that should spark a powerful response on your part. Martin Luther said that whenever he was tempted to sin, he would literally run away yelling, "I am baptized!" Think for a moment what it means when you say **I am baptized!** For those who received believer's baptism, it should recall that moment when you publicly professed your faith, pledging your life thereafter to live as Christ's disciple. For those of you baptized as an infant, it means the same thing, though first as a promise your parents made in your behalf as they pledged to raise you in the faith until that day when you could make such an affirmation for yourself. Either way to remind yourself that **I am Baptized**, is to remember that you owe God, not yourself, certainly not the Devil, your life, your allegiance, your loyalty.

Think for a moment: **“What kind of memorials do you have in your life?”** When was the last time you sat down to remember your memorial moments.

The Memorial stones were also to serve as a basis for the Israelis to share faith so that their children might never forget. Twice in this chapter, the parents were reminded of their responsibility to communicate God’s Word and His calling on to their children from generation to generation.

“When your children ask their parents in time to come, “What do these stones mean?” then you shall let your children know, “Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.” For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever. (4:21-24)

As with other memorials in the Old Testament, the intention of those stones - especially the ones sticking up out of the middle of the river – was to provoke questioning, especially from future generations. Questions that led to never forgetting.

God also knows how easily we forget and that we need such memorials to rekindle our faith lest we forget to teach our children. Like Israel, **Christianity is never more than one generation away from extinction.** If we are not careful America could be the next nation to forget God. Just think for a moment how far our country has drifted away from its Christian foundation in just one generation.

1962 – Group prayer in public schools is declared illegal
1963 - Bible reading in Schools was banned
1980 - It became illegal to post the Ten Commandments on school house walls.
1992 – Clergy led prayers at graduations were banned with student led prayers at public sports events soon to follow.

God’s warning to Israel was not to let the values of the pagan society surrounding them dictate their values, which sadly is what it eventually did just as our post-christian society is now attempting to do to ours. (Deuteronomy 6:12-15)

That is why the memorial stones were also meant to be a sign to a lost world. *“ so that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever.” (v. 24)*

It has always been God’s plan that the whole world should “know,” that He is the only living God. Not only was the crossing of the Jordan a stirring event for Israel, but it was also a terrifying event for all the people living in the land of Canaan. Imagine what the next group of people to come upon those memorial stones sticking up out of the flood

waters first thought. Then imagine what they and others thought thereafter upon learning their actual significance.

BUT MORE THAN JUST REMEMBERING, THE BUILDING OF THESE MEMORIALS WERE TO BE A TIME FOR ISRAEL TO RENEW THEIR PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO GOD

The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (7).

Joshua not only issued the order for the men to go back, but he personally joined them as they made their journey back and forth to the center of the riverbed, both retrieving and then returning stones.

Once the twelve men had carried twelve stones to the shore of Canaan and after he built the altar in the middle of the river, Joshua then commanded the priests with the Ark of the Covenant to finish crossing the river. The moment the feet of those priests touched the other side, the flood waters of the Jordan River came rusing back downstream. **Just as easily as God had opened the door to the Promise Land for them, now He had closed it.** For the people of Israel the message was clear; there was no going back to Egypt, God could and would only lead them forward to accomplish all which He had promised them.

The significance of the day which they stepped into the Promised Land being exactly forty years to the day when they stepped out of Egypt, would also remind the People of Israel, that just as God through Moses, had led them for 40 years in the wilderness, now God through Joshua, would lead them in fulfilling all the promises of the Promised Land He had made to their patriarchs.

Leaving the edge of the river, the Israelites' traveled on another five miles to Gilgal to make their camp and build their second memorial. **Gilgal** means "**the reproach has been rolled away.**" Forty years of spiritual defeat and failure have been rolled away. It was the dawn of a new beginning in a new land. The days of sullen refusal to respond to God under Moses were gone, complaining was ended, hopeless wandering in the wilderness was behind them. They were now a people with a powerful new sense of purpose, determined to take new territory with God.

Likewise for the believer today, we should be able to look back to those monumental places, people, or occasions in which God has changed our directions and given us new hope and a new sense of purpose. A time when we, by an act of bold faith, decided to abandon ourselves to God and step out into the unknown to take new territory for Him.

The point is that God knows how we think and how easily we forget; that is the reason why He instructed Joshua to build not one, but two memorials. So that each time the Israelites' saw one or the other, they would be reminded that they had not crossed the Jordan by their own ability, by their own strength, but because of God.

Lest we forget. I challenge you to spend some time thinking through your memorial stones.

- Let them draw you closer to God reminding you of His faithfulness.
- Use them to teach your children and your children's children of God's goodness.
- Use them as a testimony to the world to where your faith and allegiance stands.

And if you remember nothing else, remember what it means to declare to yourself,

I HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED!

Let's pray about this.