**THE TWELVE STONES**

August 25, 2019

Joshua 4:1-24

Key Verse 4:6-7 “…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.”

In the previous chapter we studied how God enabled the people of Israel to cross the Jordan River just as he had dried up the Red Sea in Moses’ time. We learned that the Jordan River symbolizes obstacles that hinder our spiritual growth. Many times, we don’t know what to do when the obstacle is too great. In order to cross the Jordan, we need to trust God, consecrate ourselves and follow through. Then amazing things happen. We move on to the new level of Christianity. We can be mature servants of God. In today’s passage, God commands Joshua to set up twelve stones out of the Jordan River as a memorial. Human beings are very forgetful. We often forget what God has done for us. So in the Bible, many ancestors of faith set up memorials to remember what God has done. For example, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Moses built an altar of stones to commemorate God’s covenant with Israel (Ex. 24:4). Gideon was hiding from the Midianites, and the angel of God appeared to him. When Gideon realized that he met the angel of God, he thought that he was going to die. Then the angel said, “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.” Then Gideon built an altar to the Lord and called it The Lord is Peace. He wanted to remember that the holy God came, not as a consuming fire, but as peace. (Judges 6:24) In this passage, God commands Joshua to set up twelve stones to commemorate the crossing of the Jordan. We must also mark the miracles of God in our memories and pass those memories along to the next generation.

General Joshua and his people crossing the Jordan River is indeed a remarkable historical event. General Joshua and his people probably wanted to have a great party to celebrate their victory in crossing the Jordan River. But when the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord commanded General 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 stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.” (2-3) General Joshua was very tired. His soldiers were also very tired. In this situation, to bring twelve stones from where the ark of the Lord stood seemed to make no sense. But General Joshua did not think so, because it was God’s command. Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe; (5) and Joshua 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, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites.” According to these verses, twelve men chosen earlier (3:12) were to go back to where the priests were standing in the middle of the river, holding the ark. Each man was to pick up a large rock or stone from the middle of the Jordan and carry it to the side of the river where Israel would camp in the land of Canaan. Notice three reasons that are given for this action.

**First**, it is to remember what God has done. Look at verse 7b. “These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” First of all, these stones are to remind those who were present of their personal experience of what they saw, heard and felt. We need to keep a clear memory of what God did for us so that we may never lose our sense of awe and wonder of what God has done in our lives. That is the reason why we share our testimonies. In Genesis 28, when Jacob was fleeing from Esau, he felt tired and terrified. But God appeared to him in a dream and promised to bless him. Then Jacob couldn't sleep the rest of the night, for awesome fear of God filled his heart. The next morning he took the stone he had used for a pillar, poured oil on it and called that place “Bethel,” meaning, “house of God.” When God helped Samuel to defeat the Philistines, he took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the Lord helped us.” What kind of memorials do you have in your life? What is your Ebenezer stone? We need to have a clear testimony to testify to other people God’s grace in our lives. I remember clearly in 1988 as I listened to Dr. Samuel Lee’s message on Isaiah 6:8. It said, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’” Then I cried out, “Here am I. Send me!” At that moment, darkness of despair and hopelessness were gone, and I made a decision to teach the Bible to university students, and God gave me clear direction in my life.

Secondly, the Memorial stones were to serve as a basis of sharing faith with their children. Notice that in verse 6 this memorial will cause the children to ask; “What do these stones mean to you?” Then they need to teach clearly God’s work. Look at verse 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.” Again in verses 21-24, “He said to the Israelites, ‘In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘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 just 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.’” As with other memorials in the Old Testament, the intention of the memorial was to provoke questioning especially from future generations. The former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey warned that Christianity is just a “generation away from extinction” in Britain unless churches make a dramatic breakthrough in teaching young people about the faith. He said that their constant internal debates were like no more than “rearranging furniture when the house is on fire.” So instead of arguing over rituals, we should be diligent in teaching young people about God.

Joshua’s desire for a memorial commemorating God’s might power displayed for Israel was based on what he had learned watching Moses. Recall that God set a memorial in Israel as He brought the Israelites out of slavery. He appointed the Passover for the generations to come. Exodus 12:14 and 13:14 says, “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.” “In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.”

As the family would observe the Passover Meal, it would be natural that children would ask their parents, “What does this mean?” When the little ones asked, their question would provide opportunity for parents to exalt God by telling of His mercy and His goodness demonstrated to the nation. Parents could tell their children again of His might displayed for His people. The point was so essential that Moses would repeat this forty years later in Deuteronomy 6:20-25: “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us’” Jesus died for our sins on the cross and gave us the forgiveness of sins and made us God’s holy children. Jesus gave us communion to commemorate his sacrifice for our sins, and to look forward to his glorious second coming. We will do communion after the message.

**Second**, it was a time of renewing personal commitment. Look at verse 8. “So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. 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.” Joshua not only issued the order for the men to go back but he personally joined them as they made their journey back to the center of the riverbed. Look at verse 9. “Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.” According to a footnote based on an alternative translation, it seems that while the men were carrying their stones back to the shore, Joshua personally picked up another twelve stones and built a memorial in the very center of the riverbed, as a personal act of worship. For Joshua this was a very private act. It was also representative of a pivotal point in his walk with God

Once the twelve men have carried twelve stones to the shore of Canaan, and after Joshua has built his altar in the middle of the river, he commanded the priest to come out of the Jordan. Look at verse 15-16. “Then the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Command the priests carrying the ark of the Testimony to come up out of the Jordan.’” So the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before (18). The moment that the feet of the priest touched the other side, the wall of water that had piled up for miles back up the river came crashing back into place.

Let’s think for a moment about the priests who had to stand in the middle of the river until 1.6 million Israelites passed through. It was a terrifying moment. They were extremely patient. When the 1.6 million Israelites crossed over the Jordan by God’s grace, it was natural for the priests to come out of the Jordan, following in the rear of the people. But they were waiting for General Joshua’s command to come out. The priests’ patience could have run out while they were waiting for Joshua’s command to come out. But they waited. Here we learn that we must be very patient in doing God’s work by faith.

**Third**, it was to roll away old defeats. 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.” It is significant that this happened on the tenth day of the first month; this is exactly forty years to the day since Israel marched out of Egypt. Leaving the edge of the river, the Israelites went to a place called Gilgal to make their camp. 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 great new beginning in a new land. The days of stubborn refusal to respond to God under Moses were gone, complaining was ended, and 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. They would conquer the Promised Land by faith. As his expression of faith in God and a sign of the conquest of the Promised Land, Joshua set up the twelve stones they had taken from the Jordan River. It was the symbol of God’s victory. It was the symbol of the victory of God’s people.

Likewise, for Christians today we should be able to look back and see those monumental 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, decide to give up our own ideas and step out into the unknown to take new territory for God. The monument that was built with those twelve stones was to serve as a visible reminder of the faithfulness of God. It was also a silent monument to the special day on which the people of God boldly placed their feet in the surging, rushing current of the Jordan, confident that God would see them to safety on the other side.

Today we will have communion. May God help us remember what God has done and testify to others. May God bless our prayer for a new academic year, and the new academic year will be filled with God’s victory.