

“What Do These Stones Mean?”

Joshua 4

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Introduction:

Perhaps all of us here this morning would agree that we are living in a world full of monuments and memorials. We look around us, and we see cemeteries full of headstones that are designed to help us remember. We drive down the road and we see a cross or a bouquet of flowers, and we know that we are looking at a memorial to someone who died on that spot. We look around our city, and we see various plaques and monuments. In St. Louis, you can see the Gateway Arch, a monument to the westward expansion of this nation. In New York City, you can go to Ground Zero and see a memorial to the firefighters who died on 9-11. In our nation's capital, you can see the Lincoln Memorial, or the Washington Monument, or the World War II memorial (in the foreground of this particular picture). You can see the monuments to the wars in Korea and Viet Nam. Across the Potomac River, you can see Arlington National Cemetery, and you can see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We look around us, and there are memorials almost everywhere.

This morning, though, as we continue our lesson from last week, I would like for us to consider an ancient monument—a simple memorial that was built to honor and memorialize the crossing of the Jordan River. The passage is found in **Joshua 4**. In our pew Bibles, the Scripture starts on **page 351**. As we look at **Joshua 4**, we will discover that Joshua and the Israelites actually set up two memorials, and both memorials are simply piles of stones. As I started researching this lesson several weeks ago, I discovered that there is a name for this. Piles of rocks that are set up to mark a spot (for whatever reason) are referred to as CAIRNS. The first one here is found at the peak of Bald Mountain in the Adirondacks. I discovered that the building of cairns is a universal practice, and a tradition that goes almost all the way back to the beginning of time. The next one is found a little closer to home in the prairie near Kellogg, Iowa. It was actually built a little less than ten years ago as an experiment to see how long it would last. There is no mortar, but the rocks are local and are simply fit together. As I prepared for this morning's lesson, I also discovered that there is such a thing as a sea cairn. This one is located off the coast of Finland. They are used for navigation and are often painted white to make them more visible. And the last one here is found at the peak of a hill somewhere in England.

And just in case you wanted to build your own (maybe in your backyard or something), I have included a rather unusual insert in this morning's bulletin—a

publication from the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain. They have put together a pamphlet, *"Practical Notes to Help Those Embarking on a Cairn-Building Project."* The little pamphlet includes everything you will ever need to know about building your own stone monument! So, this is an ancient art form, an ancient practice, and it definitely continues into modern times.

This morning, though, let us go back and look at two of these cairns that are referred to in the Bible. If you will, please look with me at **Joshua 4**. The people of Israel have crossed over the Jordan River after wandering for forty years in the wilderness. As we learned last week, the crossing was miraculous. They had crossed the Jordan River at flood stage, and yet the people did not even get their feet wet. And with that, we pick up with **Joshua 4**...

¹ Now when all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, ² "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, ³ and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight.' " ⁴ So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the sons of Israel, one man from each tribe; ⁵ and Joshua said to them, "Cross again to the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel. ⁶ "Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' ⁷ then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever."

⁸ Thus the sons of Israel did as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, just as the LORD spoke to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel; and they carried them over with them to the lodging place and put them down there. ⁹ Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day. ¹⁰ For the priests who carried the ark were standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything was completed 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; ¹¹ and when all the people had finished crossing, the ark of the LORD and the priests crossed before the people. ¹² The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle array before the sons of Israel, just as Moses had spoken to them; ¹³ about 40,000

equipped for war, crossed for battle before the LORD to the desert plains of Jericho.

¹⁴ On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life. ¹⁵ Now the LORD said to Joshua, ¹⁶ "Command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that they come up from the Jordan." ¹⁷ So Joshua commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan." ¹⁸ It came about when the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD had come up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up to the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before.

¹⁹ Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month and camped at Gilgal on the eastern edge of Jericho. ²⁰ Those twelve stones which they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. ²¹ He said to the sons of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?' ²² then you shall inform your children, saying, 'Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.' ²³ "For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the LORD your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; ²⁴ that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever."

As we look back over these 24 verses, I would like for us to consider three basic reasons concerning why God wanted the people to build a pile of stones.

I. And of course the first and most obvious reason is that GOD WANTED THE PEOPLE TO REMEMBER.

Of course today, some of us have a hard time remembering things. Several years ago, I started writing almost everything down. Of course now I can't remember where I put my notes! But it is interesting that various forms of the word "**remember**" are found more than 230 times in the Bible. There are certain things that God wants us to remember. In the Old Testament, the people celebrated the Passover meal to help them remember their deliverance by the Lord out of the land of Egypt. In the New Testament, we celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week—in part, as a reminder of what the Lord has done for us on the cross.

And so here in **Joshua 4**, we find that God tells the people to take twelve stones, one for each tribe, from the dried up bed of the Jordan River, and they are told to stack them up as a memorial, as a reminder of what the Lord had just done. The stones were a reminder of where they had been, the stones were a reminder of who they were, the stones were a reminder of what the Lord had done, that the Lord had been

with them through this journey. So, whenever they looked back at the Jordan River from the Promised Land, they would remember for years to come that God had been with them and had brought them into the land of Canaan. The stones, then, marked the boundary between hoping for that milk and honey and actually drinking that milk and eating that honey.

Today, we also know how important it is to remember. It is important for husbands and wives to remember how it was in the beginning—to remember that one-bedroom apartment, to remember that old car, to remember some of those early struggles, and to remember coming through on the other side. It is good to remember the challenges. If God has brought us through some kind of addiction, we can remember that, and we can thank God. If God has brought us through some kind of health concern, we can thank God for that. If God has brought us through some kind of financial struggle, we can remember, and we can thank God for doing that. If you come into the church office over at our home, you will see some physical reminders of what God has done. You will see a picture of the church building down in Janesville with a for sale sign out in the front yard. After many years of false teaching, those who were faithful slowly started attending elsewhere—down in Beloit or over in Monroe. But finally around 1990, the preacher finally left and the building was put up for sale. At that point, those who had slowly left came back and took the building off the market and made a fresh start with a commitment to truth. I keep that picture on my wall as a reminder 1.) of the danger of false teaching and the damage that it can do to a congregation, and 2.) as a reminder of what God can do through a small but dedicated group of Christians, and with God's help the church in Janesville is strong today.

It is so easy to forget, and yet in this effort to try to keep them from forgetting, God told the nation of Israel to choose 12 men to work together and to pick out those stones and to set them up as a memorial—as a reminder of what God had done. Every time they looked at that memorial they would remember that they crossed over with God's help and not on their own. First of all, then, God told them to build a monument so that they would remember.

II. There is a second reason why God told them to pile up these stones, and that is: TO TEACH THE CHILDREN.

In other words, this was not just for the current generation, but these stone piles were to be used as a teaching tool to pass along a very important lesson to the next generation. To most people passing by, those stones would have no meaning; however, God said that at some point in the future, children would be passing by, perhaps little children would be playing down by the river, and God says that the children will ask their parents, ***"What do these stones mean?"*** Twice in this chapter, God says that children will ask their parents about the meaning of these stones. Don't we know that children love asking questions? Several weeks ago in the car on the way home from the Wednesday evening Bible class, our youngest (out of the blue) asked us whether a queen has the same power as a king. Well, I don't know. I've never thought about that. As far as I know, I've never had a need to

think about that. And yet her little mind was churning away in the back seat with that very important question! One of our members came to me a week or so ago with a question from one of her grandsons, **“How did Jonah die?”** And again, I have no idea! I’ve never thought about that. In fact, I don’t know whether Jonah is even mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament. And yet that 4-year old was thinking about Jonah and had a very important question, **“How did Jonah die?”** And so again, we know that kids are curious and that they love asking questions.

We can imagine, then, a family traveling by the Jordan River maybe decades later, and the kid sees this pile of rocks, it is obviously not a natural rock formation, and so the kid asks, **“Why? Why are those rocks piled up like that?”** That is a typical kid question! And this is the reason why God had them put those rocks there! The memorial was a teaching tool. The memorial was a visual aid. The memorial gave parents at least one more excuse (one more reason) for teaching their children about their faith in God.

Of course today, we know that the church is only one generation away from apostasy. If we do not teach our children, the church ceases to exist. The same could be said of ancient Israel. In fact, we remember from the book of Judges that that is exactly what happened. The Bible says in **Judges 2:10**, ***“All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.”*** That passage goes on to explain that the next generation very quickly went on to worshiping Baal and the other false Gods. The parents had failed to teach their children. And so here in **Joshua 2**, God was very clear and repeated it twice: Parents were to use these stones as a way of teaching their children about what the Lord had done. The same was true for the Passover feast. God told them to bring that perfect lamb into their home basically as a pet for four days, and that they were to slaughter it at the end of those four days. It was a visual reminder about the high cost of sin. It was leading them to one day appreciate what God had done through His own Son.

And please notice: This command is addressed to the families! This teaching is not something that the priests were told to do. This was not something that the children would learn in a sermon or a Bible class, but this is something that they would learn from their parents. The parents could not delegate this to a professional teacher, but this is something that they were personally responsible for doing. Over and over again in the Scriptures, the responsibility of teaching the next generation falls primarily on the parents. Now, certainly we are thankful for everything that our children learn in their Bible classes, but if they don’t get it at home, if we as parents are not willing to try to answer their questions, then we are not obeying what the Scriptures have told us to do. We can tell our children and grandchildren about how we first learned about the Lord’s church. We can tell them why we made the decision to obey the gospel. We can tell them what it was like to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins—what we were feeling and thinking at the time. When they ask us why we eat a little bit of unleavened bread we can tell them why and we can explain why it needs to be unleavened. When they ask us about the grape juice, we can explain what the Lord has done for us through the blood of Jesus Christ. When

we write out our check for church, we can explain how important it is to sacrifice some of our hard-earned funds as a gift to the Lord. When we discover something interesting in our daily Bible reading, we can pass it on to our children. So, the memorial stones were not only for the benefit of those who actually crossed the river, but those stones were also for the benefit of future generations.

III. As we go back to Joshua 4, I would suggest another reason for the stones, and that is: THE STONES WERE PILED UP IN ORDER TO HONOR GOD.

Please look again at verse 24, where we find that these stones were to be piled up, "...[so] **that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever.**" The word "fear" here does not refer to cowering or shaking in terror in front of God, but it refers to a reverent respect. It refers to viewing God with reverence and awe. We express that awe through worship. Every time an Israelite passed by this monument, they would "**know that the hand of the Lord is mighty.**" They would know that God Almighty was worthy of their worship, that He deserved their praise and their obedience. The monument was a statement: When you see this, you are to fear God.

At camp this past week, we studied the book of Ecclesiastes, and the book concludes in Ecclesiastes 12:13, "**The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.**" In other words, this is not just for the Israelites, but all people are to fear God. And the God who piled up the waters of the Jordan River is the same God we worship today. The word "**worship**" goes back to an Old English word meaning "**worth ship.**" In other words, when we worship we are declaring that God deserves our praise, that He is worthy of it, that He deserves our respect. Building that monument was an act of worship, and it was an act of worship that would benefit "**all the peoples of the earth.**"

As we apply this to our situation today, we as Christians also have a responsibility to influence the world around us. Jesus said in Matthew 5:14-16, "**You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.**" I know that once we have been Christians for quite a while, sometimes we may end up spending most of our time with other Christians. The Bible, however, wants us to get involved with the world, to show those on the outside what the Christian life is all about. That is our challenge as a congregation. That is one reason why we have tried to get involved with the neighborhood association right here in this neighborhood. We don't have a single member of this congregation who lives in this neighborhood, but we are giving away clothing, and we are cleaning their parks. We are getting involved, and there is so much more we can do. The pile of stones, perhaps in a similar way, was put there as a monument to honor God, it was an act of worship that was put there so that the world would know what the Lord had done.

Conclusion:

As we close this morning, we remind each other how easy it is to forget. We look around, and we can see memorials all around us. The ancient Israelites were told to simply make a pile of stones. Those stones were to serve as a reminder, they were to serve as a tool for teaching the next generation, and they were to serve as a way of honoring God. What I find interesting is that there were two piles of stones that day. One pile was made by the men of Israel as these stones were taken out of the river and piled up in Gilgal, the place where the people spent the first night in the Promised Land. But the second pile was made by Joshua, and the pile he made was actually in the river. And what I find interesting is that as far as I can tell, those stones (that memorial) would only be visible to God. Joshua put those stones right there in the river where the priests were standing with the Ark of the Covenant, and once the waters were released, those stones could only be seen by God.

As we think about these two memorials—one public and one private—we think again about the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is both a public statement and a private act of worship between us and the Lord. In our memorial today, we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (**1 Corinthians 11:26**), and we also do it in remembrance of the Lord (**Luke 22:19**). It is for our own good, we use it to teach our children, and we also use it as a way of teaching those on the outside who may be visiting with us.

If you have not yet obeyed the gospel, the Bible teaches that we respond to the sacrifice of Jesus by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. If you have only been sprinkled, or if you were baptized as a baby, or if you were baptized in some way or for some reason that is not in the Bible, we would love to talk with you about that. But if you are ready to obey God's plan right now, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org