

Setting Up Stones To See God Joshua 3-4

Throughout history stones have been used for a variety of purposes. Some purposes are bad. Abel was killed by his brother with a stone. Jesus talked about hanging a millstone around the neck of someone who caused a child to sin. Stones have been hurled with slingshots and catapulted by a trebuchet to destroy castles, also made of stone.

The minerals in some stones can be dangerous to one's health. While they may be beautiful to look at, they can lead to things like lead, copper or arsenic poisoning. Asbestos in some stones can cause cancer, other stones give off radiation.

A stone was the source of the first temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness.

A stone covered the tomb of Jesus.

But stones also have value and are very useful. The same millstone can grind grain.

Whet stones sharpen blades.

Stones have been used to make roads, bridges, castles, homes, temples, pyramids, sculptures, landscape, or jewelry (in the '70's they were pets).

A stone was used to kill Goliath.

A stone was used by Jacob as a pillow, but later set up as a monument.

We use stones in slogans like *"it's just a stone's throw away"* meaning it's just a short distance.

Or *"a rolling stone gathers no moss,"* which refers to a person who is always travelling or changing jobs having the advantage of no responsibilities or being tied down, the disadvantage being there is no permanent place to live.

Or *"nothing is etched in stone"* which speaks of something not being permanent or established but is subject to alteration.

This morning I would like to talk about another use of stones. It's found in **Joshua 3 and 4** where we turn our attention this morning.

A few weeks ago, I read a book written by someone I knew who served on the staff at Camp Barakel. It's simply titled Stones. The subtitle is "An

Extraordinary Invitation to Ordinary People." That's what we find in these two chapters of Joshua. It's God's invitation to ordinary people like us to see Him do the extraordinary. The stones in Joshua are reminders of what God did. We'll see some things about God that will help us move forward in faith when we face what is otherwise something impossible and why setting up our own stones builds greater faith in Him and is a witness to others. He is our resource when we go through trials. But I also want us to see our responsibility.

Let me set the stage by reading an excerpt from the introduction of Steve McCormick's book.

Stones page 4, 5, 6

Are we setting up stones from our life experiences in seeing God work that testifies to the living and all-powerful God?

As I reread **Joshua 3 and 4**, chapters I have read dozens of times, something jumped out at me that I had never noticed before. Yes, I knew about the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant into the raging river before the waters were stopped up. Yes, I knew about the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River when it was at flood stage.

Yes, I knew about the men gathering up the stones to make a monument.

They are each an important part of the account of their crossing because they demonstrate God's presence and work to make it happen.

Joshua 4:1-5

The 12 representatives were instructed to return to the middle of the river where the priests were standing and gather up a stone and take it back to the riverbank. You might wonder what the big deal is picking up some stones and hauling them to shore. But I got excited when it dawned on me that the stones they picked up were from the middle of the riverbed which had just been at flood stage raging down from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. You may say, "HUH? I don't get it."

Here's how that struck me, and it's given me a different perspective on this account and how I see the storms of life I go through. They were asked to

remove stones and carry them to where they were to camp and there set up a memorial. As I thought about those stones taken from the middle of the river which had just been at flood stage I realized that it's often the tribulations in my life, when things seem like they are raging, that God has cleared the way through the trials that are at flood stage. He has led the way and He's telling me to gather up a stone from that experience after I've crossed through it to set it up as a memorial of His deliverance, to remember how He delivered, how He provided, how He protected.

What are we more likely to remember: when every day is pleasant or rosy or when I've had storms in my life? The older I get, the more prone I am when talking with people to talk about the physical aches and pains I'm having. I'm more likely to focus on them than I am to talk about how peachy I feel. James tells us we go through trials to develop our spiritual walk. These stones from the river were reminders not just of the pain of the past, but especially the deliverance and power of God in keeping of His promises.

It is in those raging storms that faith is developed or faith is destroyed. **Will we use them as stones to build our faith or stones that break our faith?** It's my opinion that stones not only remind of the miracle of crossing the Jordan on dry ground by the miraculous power of God, but they would remind of the way God had provided and protected in all the years of their wandering. It would remind them of God's faithfulness and of their need to have faith in that God.

Will our memorial stones make us bitter or better?

Let's begin by considering our resource in God.

I. OUR RESOURCE IN GOD

The Israelites were about to learn another lesson on whether they could trust God to keep His Word. From what we learn by reading about the previous 40 years, there was a significant lack of faith in God. The Israelites who now stood on the banks of the Jordan River were going to learn a lesson on the

dependable person of God.

A. The Dependable Person of God

Let's take a quick glance through Scripture to remind us just how dependable God is.

Malachi 3:6 "I am God, I change not."

Numbers 23:19 God does not lie but does exactly what He says.

Lamentations 3:22-23 God's faithfulness is great.

I Corinthians 10:13 God faithfully helps us when we face temptation.

Galatians 5:22 God develops the fruit of His faithfulness in us.

I John 1:9 God faithfully forgives our sin when we repent.

I Corinthians 1:9 The God who called us into fellowship with His Son, Jesus, is faithful.

II Thessalonians 3:3 God is faithful to strengthen and protect us when we face the evil one.

II Timothy 2:13 Even when we are faithless, He remains faithful.

Hebrews 10:23 God who promised is faithful.

The Hebrew word translated 'faithfulness' means steadfastness, firmness, and fidelity. The opposite of faithfulness is to be ever changing or wishy-washy.

Psalm 119:89-90 "Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations."

God's character and God's Word are the same. Both are never-ending truth. His Word is just as true today as it was when the ink was fresh or when He spoke it to the very first couple created. We only get to know the unchanging character of God's faithfulness by getting to know Him. As a student of God's Word, we learn that what He says He does. We learn to know His faithfulness by studying His Word, by looking at how He has worked in the lives of others and in our own lives, and in learning to

follow His voice. As one author wrote: **“We can trust God to be true to Himself.”**

These Israelites had to learn that God is dependable. The promise God made to Abraham of an inheritance in the Promised Land was passed on to Isaac and then to Jacob and then to His 12 sons and to the coming generations. God told Jacob to leave and go to Egypt where they would live and grow into a vast people who would one day return to the land. To the Israelites living just before the exodus, that promise seemed a distant, perhaps even forgotten promise since it was made over 400 years earlier. But God’s timing and ways are not ours. Faith must be exercised in the dependability of God who is always faithful to keep His word.

Because of the unfaithfulness of the Israelites who came out of Egypt to trust God, they wandered for 40 years while the adults died in the wilderness for their lack of believing God, their unwillingness to depend on God. Now the younger generation stood on the edge of the Promised land. Would their faith vacillate or would it be victorious? It would stand strong if they saw the dependable person of God.

God loves to see our faith in His faithfulness.

How would they see the dependable person of God? It’s evident in the displayed presence of God.

B. The Displayed Presence of God

For 400 years God’s presence seemed distant, even silent. He had spoken to Abraham on different occasions directing his steps, testing his faith, giving him promises of making him into a great nation.

He had spoken the same promise to Isaac. Then they were given to Jacob. His first real encounter with God came at Bethel where he saw God standing at the top of a ladder reaching to heaven with angels climbing up and down the ladder. Twenty years later as Jacob fled Laban, he encountered the Lord instructing him to return to his homeland. This was followed by a meeting with God where he wrestled God. Years later, famine spread through the land and Jacob once again heard

the voice of God instructing him to go to Egypt. As far as Scripture is concerned, that’s the last recorded conversation with God until Moses’ experience at the burning bush. After the exodus from Egypt God met with Moses on Mt. Sinai to give the 10 commandments. God was going to lead them to the Promised Land which had been designated as their inheritance through Abraham. He would lead them along the way through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the pillar moved, they were to move. When the pillar stopped, they were to stop. As long as the pillar stayed, they were to stay. But that all changed when they arrived on the banks of the Jordan River. There would be no more pillar of cloud or fire. Notice **verses 2-4**.

In other words, the pillar of cloud and fire would no longer be their guide. They were to follow the Ark of the Covenant, which had now become the symbol of God’s presence. The Ark would lead where they were to go. But just like the pillars of cloud and fire, it was still a walk of faith, an act of trusting God. As God said, they had never gone that way, so He would lead them, and they needed to trust Him by following. It reminds me of **Genesis 12:1** **“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’”**

In other words, following the Lord requires both faith and obedience. If we do that, we can be assured of His continued presence.

Psalms 23:4 in the shadow of death the Lord has promised to be with us. Follow Him.

Hebrews 13:5 gives the promise of never leaving or forsaking us. Follow Him.

Isaiah 41:10 says we are not to fear because God is with us. Follow Him.

Why can we trust the promise of His abiding promise? Because as we just saw, He is faithful to keep His word.

Isaiah 49:14-16 **“But Zion has said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forsaken me.’ ‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and**

**have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget, I will not forget you!
See, I have engraved you on the palms of my
hands...”**

As the Israelites came to the Jordan River, they saw it at flood stage. The width of the river where they were to cross was normally about 100', but the spring rain combined with the snow melt from nearby Mt. Hermon swelled the river so that it overflowed its banks. From their perspective, it was impossible to cross. But God said His presence would be with them and would lead them by the Ark of the Covenant. And it's here that we see the deployed power of God.

C. The Deployed Power of God – 3:9-17

Maybe they were thinking that God had promised to be with them in the past, but could they rely on Him now by helping them get across the river. Many of them would have remembered the miraculous plagues in Egypt that affected their oppressors while sparing them. Those same people would have seen the miracle of the Red Sea parting so they could walk across safely and escape the Egyptian army. After they had safely crossed, they would have witnessed those same waters crashing together to drown the army chasing them. They would have been witness to God's provision of manna every day for 40 years. They would have seen God's provision when there was no water.

But now, here they are on the bank of the river wondering if God would once again show up big. Perhaps there was a look of fear on the faces of their children as they clung to the hands of parents. It was time to put faith into action. It was time to march forward. Sometimes we can become paralyzed by trials and tribulations that overwhelm us. Will we trust God or trust ourselves. **Proverbs 3:5-6** tell us to put all our trust in God and when we do, He will direct our steps. When we have even an inkling of doubt, fear will grip us and make us afraid to move.

The people were instructed that when they saw the priests carrying the Ark they were to move out, they

were to follow. When they came to the edge of the river, I think it took more faith on the part of the first two priests carrying the Ark than the others behind them. They were the first to step into the river. They were the first to test the waters. They were the first to walk by faith. But as soon as they stepped into the water, it stopped flowing. Scripture tells us it was stopped upriver to a town called Adam. Scholars aren't sure where that town was actually located, but most estimate it to be about 16 miles north. Not only did God hold the water back, but the Bible tells us that the ground the priests stood on was completely dry. No riverbed muck.

Right across the road from where my Grandma lived in New York was the Black River. It was about the same width as the Jordan River. When we were younger and visiting her, our aunts would wade across the river with us to catch polliwogs. The riverbed had big chunks of slimy rock. Other parts were mucky. But our aunts were right there with us helping us get across. We didn't have anything to be afraid of as long as they were there.

The water stopped and the riverbed was dry. Forty years early when they crossed the Red Sea, God used an all-night wind to dry up the sea bed, but not this time. Picture the people of Israel walking across the riverbed. The more that crossed the greater confidence of those who came behind. The presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant and the witness of seeing the water stopped reassured their faith.

We need to take this event for what it is: a supernatural act of God.

The event happened as predicted – **3:13, 15**

The timing was exact – **v. 15**

The event occurred at flood stage – **v. 15**

The water was stopped for many hours to allow everyone to get across – **v. 16**

The riverbed became dry at once – **v. 17**

The water returned immediately as soon as the priests stepped out of the water – **4:18**

You may recall from **II Kings 2:8** that both Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan River on dry ground. Then Elisha crossed back over a short time later. Bible critics explain these occurrences away by

claiming that it must have been an earthquake. They cite December 8, 1267, when an earthquake caused the high banks of the Jordan River to collapse and dam up the river for about 10 hours. In 1927 another earthquake blocked the river for 21 hours.

Could God have used natural events like an earthquake to stop the waters? The answer is yes, He could, but the evidence in the text testifies to a supernatural event. Such is the power of God deployed to provide safe passage across. As we sometimes sing “God will make a way, where there seems to be no way.” **Are we willing to follow Him in obedience even when the way seems impossible?**

Once across the 12 selected leaders, one from each tribe, returned to the middle of the river to gather a stone and carry it out with them. Make note that there were actually two piles of stones set up. In **4:9** we read that Joshua also erected a pile of stones in the middle of the river where the priests had stood. The other pile of stones was carried to Gilgal, in the Promised Land where they set up camp. Let’s look back again at why they were to do this.

Joshua 4:4-7, 19-24

When we read these verses, we actually see two reasons given for the pile of stones. The first was to remind the Israelites, especially the generations that followed who had not have witnessed the actual miracle of the river being stopped up that God had done a supernatural act to cross on dry ground. It was to serve as a reminder of God’s person and presence and power and provision and promise and protection as they came into the Promised Land.

Those who crossed the river walked by sight as they witnessed the power of God stopping the flowing waters of the Jordan River allowing them to walk across. The memorial was for the following generations who hadn’t been there so that in their days they might walk by faith in the God of the miraculous. There were no cameras to capture the event on film. No cell phones to take selfies. No Facebook to post what had happened. No media to report the event. All they had was this pile of stones.

So I ask you again, **what floods has God asked you**

to cross from which you can pull up some stones to remind you of His leading you safely through?

But there is a second reason given for the stones. Notice **verse 24**: **“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.”**

Your pile of stones is a witness to others of God’s power when you follow Him through the waters where He is leading you. As you walk through your river, you testify to your belief in the person, the presence, and power of God to lead you through it. Cling to the person and promise of God.

Isaiah 43:2-3a “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

God is our resource when the path we are to walk seems impossible to pass because it is flooded and raging. But remember that the person of God is dependable; the presence of God is displayed; and the power of God is deployed. As the psalmist says **“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.” (Psalm 46:1-3)**

When God leads us to flooded waters, what is our response to God?

II. OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Our text gives us three things that we are to do. As they were preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses gave them this reminder:

Deuteronomy 8:1-11

“Remember how the Lord your God led you.” It was a walk of testing, a walk of faith, a walk of depending on God every step of the way.

In **Joshua 3**, the first thing we see from **verses 3-4** was that they were to follow submissively. We are

to do the same when God tells us to follow Him.

A. Follow Submissively – 3:3-4

They had to walk by faith because they were going where they had never been. A walk of faith is a walk of obedience. It's trusting in His sovereign will even though the road may be hard or in this case, the waters may be at flood stage. **Hebrews 11:6** tells us that God is pleased when we seek Him by faith.

**Will we trust Him when we don't know the way?
Will we follow Him when the way is difficult?**

Remember that the Israelites who came out of Egypt wanted to return because following God was difficult. They were disheartened by the hardships and thought it was better to return to being slaves.

Will we obey when we would rather take a different, easier path? The two spies didn't come back with their report to Joshua and say "oh, by the way, there's a bridge about 10 miles north of here that's unguarded. We can have an easy time crossing there." God wasn't going to lead them around the river, He was going to lead them through the river.

When they saw the Ark of the Covenant moving, they were to be ready to follow. You may recall the words of the song: **The Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all we have to do is follow.**
When God tells us to move, are we ready to follow Him by submitting to His will and way or will it be fear or faith?

Second, we are to consecrate ourselves spiritually.

B. Consecrate Ourselves Spiritually – 3:5

In other words, they were to be right with God. The word is also translated as sanctify, to be separated from something that is common or profane.

Romans 12:1-2

II Corinthians 6:17-18 "Therefore come out from them and be separate," says the Lord. "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be My sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty."

If we would faithfully follow the Lord, we must purify ourselves by confessing sin and not conforming to the pattern of the world. David invited God to search his heart and lead him in the way everlasting (**Psalm 139:23-24**).

Are we different in character than that of the unbelieving world or would we rather blend in? Have we consecrated ourselves by obeying His commands the best we know how? Do we listen to and repent when the Spirit convicts of sin?

If we are going to let God lead us and if we are going to walk by faith, we must prepare ourselves spiritually. Lastly, we are to teach seriously.

C. Teach Seriously – 4:5-7

It's the same kind of instruction that God gave them back in **Deuteronomy 6:5-9** that at every opportunity they were to instruct their children about the importance of obeying God, teaching them to love God with their whole being. As we have said, these memorial stones were to serve as a lasting reminder of God's presence with them, His person, His promises, His provision, His protection, and His power.

Warren Wiersbe writes: "God who can open the river is the God everybody ought to fear, love, and obey."

We are to take seriously the responsibility of teaching those coming behind us about the importance of seeing God's awesome power, His faithfulness, and His abiding presence so that they too will live by faith and follow God.

Tony Evans reminds us that "God sometimes does wondrous things in our lives too, so that when we meet a challenge in the future we will remember His power."

When we follow the Lord with all our heart by obeying Him, we will see Him lead us through the floods. Follow God in obedience. Consecrate yourselves spiritually. And then tell others about your experience of what God did for as you walk by faith. An extraordinary invitation to ordinary people. **Do you have any memorial stones?**