

SESSION 3

◀ *Remembering God's Works* ▶

JOSHUA 3:14-4:9

GOD INSTRUCTED THE PEOPLE TO SET UP A MEMORIAL
AS A REMINDER OF HIS POWER.



Archaeologists have discovered that ancient civilizations erected statues and built monumental structures to celebrate and memorialize significant people and events. These memorials helped following generations understand their identity and recognize how they became who they are. In the Bible, God often instructed His people to erect memorials so that they would not forget who God is, that they belonged to Him, and that they could always trust Him.

WHAT ARE SOME PROMINENT MEMORIALS YOU CAN THINK OF? WHY ARE THEY SIGNIFICANT, AND WHAT IMPACT DO THEY HAVE ON PEOPLE TODAY?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Chapters 3–5 accentuate three essential things the Israelites needed to remember as they entered the land of Canaan: God’s presence, God’s power, and God’s promises. Joshua instructed the people to break camp and follow the ark of the covenant as it was carried by the levitical priests. The ark represented God’s presence with Israel. It would be the Lord who would lead His people into the promised land. We should also note that it is called the ark of the *covenant*. One of God’s covenant promises to Abraham’s descendants was the land of Canaan (Josh. 3:1-5).

When it was time to cross the Jordan, the Lord instructed the priests carrying the ark to step into the waters. Normally, this would have been a precarious situation. At that time of year, the Jordan’s banks were overflowing. Nevertheless, when the priests stepped into the water, the waters receded, making a dry path for all of Israel to cross (3:6-17; 4:23).

When every Israelite had completed crossing the Jordan, the Lord commanded Joshua to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, to each take a stone from the riverbed. They were to carry it to their new camp west of the Jordan at Gilgal to set up as a memorial so that future generations would know this miraculous thing God had done. When the priests stepped out of the Jordan’s riverbed, the river resumed its course, flowing over the banks, flooding the area just as it was before (4:1-24).

Before the Israelites proceeded, three significant things happened. First, the men were circumcised. Apparently, their parents in the wilderness disobeyed God in this matter. God required circumcision as a sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). Second, they celebrated Passover, the commemoration of their redemption from slavery in Egypt. Finally, the Lord appeared to Joshua, again revealing His presence with him and the people (5:1-15).



Joshua 3:14–4:9

3:14 When **the people** **A** broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carried the **ark of the covenant** **B** ahead of the people. **15** Now the Jordan **overflows its banks** **C** throughout the harvest season. But as soon as the priests carrying the ark reached the Jordan, their feet touched the water at its edge **16** and the water flowing downstream stood still, rising up in a mass that extended as far as **Adam**, **D** a city next to Zarethan. The water flowing downstream into the Sea of the Arabah—the Dead Sea—was completely cut off, and the people crossed opposite Jericho. **17** The priests carrying the ark of the LORD’s covenant stood firmly **on dry ground** **E** in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed on dry ground until the **entire nation** **F** had finished crossing the Jordan.

4:1 After the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD spoke to Joshua: **2** “Choose twelve men from the people, one man for each tribe, **3** and command them: Take **twelve stones** **G** from this place in the middle of the Jordan where the priests are standing, carry them with you, and set them down at the place where you spend the night.” **4** So Joshua summoned the twelve men he had selected from the Israelites, one man for each tribe, **5** and said to them, “Go across to the ark of the LORD your God in the middle of the Jordan. Each of you lift a stone onto his shoulder, one for each of the Israelite tribes, **6** so that this will be a sign among you. In the future, **when your children ask** **H** you, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ **7** you should tell them, ‘The water of the Jordan was cut off in front of the ark of the LORD’s covenant. When it crossed the Jordan, the Jordan’s water was cut off.’ Therefore these stones will always be a **memorial** **I** for the Israelites.” **8** The Israelites did just as Joshua had commanded them. The twelve men took stones from the middle of the Jordan, one for each of the Israelite tribes, just as the LORD had told Joshua. They carried them to the camp and set them down there. **9** Joshua also set up twelve stones in the middle[b] of the Jordan where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing. The stones are still there today.

Key Words

A. The Israelites who had come out of the wilderness and were being prepared to enter the promised land.

B. Built according to God’s design, the ark served as a reminder of His presence with His people (Ex. 25:10-22).

C. Rainfall and melting snow fed additional water into the river, creating flood conditions.

D. A city located approximately fifteen miles up the Jordan River.

E. God had led a previous generation across the Red Sea with a similar miracle (Ex. 14:15-29).

F. More than 600,000 men, with their families, livestock, and possessions (Num. 26:51).

G. Moses and, later, Elijah used twelve stones to commemorate God’s work among His people. See Exodus 28:21; 39:14; 1 Kings 18:31.

H. The Lord highlighted the priority of teaching future generations about Him. (See Ex. 13:14; Deut. 6:7-20; Ps. 78:3-8; Isa. 38:19; Acts 2:39.)

I. The stones would serve as a lasting physical illustration of God’s power and His covenant among the Israelites.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. Dry Ground

(Josh. 3:14-17)

We can be sure that God never fails to provide perfectly for His people during their time of need.

- **Why are barriers an important part of our spiritual journey?**

2. Memorial Stones

(Josh. 4:1-7)

We should establish memorials in our lives that consistently remind us of God's work on our behalf.

- **What are some milestones that could remind people of God's work in their lives?**

3. Lasting Reminders

(Josh. 4:8-9)

God expects believers to remember and testify to what He has done for them.

- **How can previous experiences with God strengthen a person's faith?**
- **How can we pass on our faith stories to future generations?**

Apply the Text

Discuss how God has been at work in your Bible study group.

- **What significant things has God done over the years in your church?**
- **How could you as a group share these things with others?**

KEY DOCTRINE:

God

To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.

(See Exodus 20:1-3; 1 Timothy 1:17.)

BIBLE SKILL:

Reflect personally on how a biblical passage applies to your own life.

Joshua and the Israelites erected a memorial of twelve stones to help them remember and testify to what the Lord had done for them in the past. What specific memorials help you recall spiritual mountaintops in your experience with the Lord? What do you want to remember from those events? What tangible object can you use to help you remember God's work in your life at that time?

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Joshua 3:14

Consider the significance of the ark of the covenant being carried before the people.

Verses 1-13 emphasize three important details that prepare us for verse 14. First, these preceding verses emphasize the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant represented the presence of God. The lid of the ark was called the mercy seat, representing God's throne. As verse 14 indicates, the priests were responsible for carrying it "ahead of the people." Second, in verse 7 God told Joshua that He would exalt him before the people to demonstrate that, just as He was with Moses, He would be with Joshua when they crossed the Jordan. Third, the crossing of the Jordan should be understood in light of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. In both instances, God separated the waters and heaped them up so that the Israelites could cross on dry ground. Both miracles were displays of God's power on behalf of His people as He confirmed who His chosen leader was for Israel. As the priests carried the ark before the people, it was important for Israel to see God's demonstration of His power and glory again. Just as He led Israel out of captivity in Egypt by defeating their enemies, He was now victoriously leading them into the promised land. There, the Lord would again defeat Israel's enemies and give His people their inheritance.

How does this event compare to the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14, and what does that reveal about God's consistency?



Day 2: Joshua 3:15-17

Notice how the priests and the people demonstrated faith in God's instructions.

Throughout most of the year, the Jordan River was anywhere from three to ten feet deep and ninety to a hundred feet wide. However, its being at flood stage means that the water was overflowing its banks, which also means that the depth and width of the river were significantly deeper and wider than normal. Jeremiah mentions that the Jordan had a dense thicket growing along its banks on both sides. This would have made the crossing even more difficult in its flooded state (Jer. 12:5; 49:19; 50:44). With these conditions, the river appeared to be impossible to cross. Yet when the priest's feet touched the water at its edge, the flowing water of the river stood still and then rose up just like the waters of the Red Sea. The Lord delights in demonstrating His power in circumstances that are impossible for us.

"The priests carrying the ark of the LORD's covenant" (v. 17) are important to what transpired because the ark represented God's throne and presence with His people. As the priests "stood firmly on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan" with the ark of the covenant, it showed that Israel's mighty God was the One who miraculously did this. Every Israelite was able to cross the Jordan "on dry ground" just as their parents did when they crossed the Red Sea.

How did the Israelites demonstrate trust in God's instructions? How do you need to step out in faith?



Day 3: Joshua 4:1-3

Pay attention to what God wanted the twelve men to do.

Verse 1 is connected to everything that transpired in the previous chapter. This is purposely demonstrated by the writer's repetition of the phrase "the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan" (3:17; 4:1). Verse 17 in chapter 3 speaks of what was happening while all Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground, and verse 1 of chapter 4 addresses what happened after all the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Everything that follows in chapter 4 must be understood in light of this miraculous thing God did for His people. Israel needed to remember this demonstration of His awesome power and faithfulness as they entered the land of Canaan and faced its challenges.

Verse 2 is also repetitive as it reiterates the instruction Joshua gave to the Israelites to choose a man from each tribe, as the Lord commanded in 3:12. In all that was happening, Joshua was careful to do what the Lord commanded him. Obedience to God's Word is essential to being a servant of the Lord and a leader of His people. In verse 3, Joshua explained what God wanted the twelve men to do. Joshua commanded each of them to return to the riverbed of the Jordan, to take a stone from the place where the priests were standing in the middle of it, and to carry their stones to the place where they would camp that evening.

Why did God command the Israelites to set up memorial stones? What does this reveal about remembering God's work?



Day 4: Joshua 4:4-7

Focus on the meaning of the twelve stones.

Joshua instructed the twelve men representing each of the tribes of Israel to "go across to the ark of the Lord your God." This highlights what Joshua 3-4 describes—Israel's crossing the Jordan on dry land and entering the place of God's inheritance, the land of Canaan. The writer's description of what transpired here should remind believers that when Jesus saved us, He brought us out of the bondage of our sin and our wandering in the wilderness of disobedience and into our inheritance, which is in Him.

When the men reached "the middle of the Jordan" where the priests stood with the ark, each of them was instructed to "lift" what apparently was a sizable stone "onto his shoulder." Each man's stone would represent the tribe to which he belonged. The stones would be a memorial of what God had done that day. It also was to be a witness to generations to come. When their children would ask them what the meaning of the stacked stones was, the parents could tell them what God had done. This should remind believers that, when God does a wonderful work in our lives, it is important for us to remember what God has done. Not only that, but it is essential we tell others what He has done, especially future generations.

What stories of God's faithfulness do you want your family to remember?



Day 5: Joshua 4:8-9

Compare these verses to Joshua 1:16-17.

The Israelites' obedience to Joshua demonstrates how God kept His promise of exalting Joshua in the sight of all Israel so they would know God was with Joshua (3:7). Their obedience also demonstrates that the people recognized Joshua's commands came from God. Though Joshua is never called a prophet, he would be God's servant and spokesman to Israel.

Verse 8 indicates the twelve men set the stones in "the camp." Verse 9 indicates Joshua set twelve stones in "the middle of the Jordan" where the priests stood. Most commentators indicate this was probably not a second memorial but a reference to the same twelve stones that were carried to the west side of the Jordan. Verse 19 indicates the camp was located in Gilgal, a place that would have great significance in the life of Israel going forward. Thus, generations to come would have the opportunity to learn the meaning of the twelve stones. The writer of the book of Joshua indicates they still stood as a memorial at the time the book was written.

What "stones of remembrance" can you set up in your own life to remind you and others of God's faithfulness?

APPLY THE TEXT

Think about significant, specific spiritual milestones in your life when God has demonstrated His power and faithfulness to you. How could you make memorials of these events in your life to help you remember what God has done and give you opportunities to testify to others of God's faithfulness and goodness?

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