

What Do These Stones Mean?

Joshua 4:1-24

I'm holding a rock in my hand. To you it's an ordinary rock, nothing special. But it's very special to me. In fact, it's so special that it has its own spot on a shelf in my study here at the church. It doesn't look very special—its color is very ordinary, and it has several pieces broken out of it. But it has a story.

Several years ago, I was facing a crisis in my life, one of the biggest I'd ever known. I had been praying and seeking God for an answer, but I was just too close to the problem to see what He wanted me to do. So I took a day, and drove down the Natchez Trace to Rocky Springs. I took my Bible and water, and nothing else. I just wanted God to speak to me and show me the way I should go.

I spent some time at the old Methodist Church there, just me and the Lord, sitting there on one of the pews, but after two hours I was still just as clueless as when I entered. Finally, I got up and exited through one of the doors, and there in front of me was the answer God had for me that day. Directly in front of the door, across the drive, was an old tree which had been severely affected by erosion. On one side of the tree, the soil had gradually been washed away from the roots. It had not happened all at once, but just a little at a time. And as the soil had eroded away, the roots on that side of the tree, extending out just as any root of any tree does, had turned and gone straight downward.

And immediately I had my answer. It wasn't the answer I was looking for, but it was an answer, and I believe it came from God. Because when my eyes fell on that tree from that angle, the very first thought that came to my mind was "Go deeper." God was telling me that in the midst of my trouble, I should go deeper in Christ, that the solution to keeping my sanity and being able to make it through each day was to go deeper in Christ.

I was greatly encouraged! I left the church and drove to the Rocky Springs Campground, where I made my way down to the creek bed. If you've ever been down on that creek bed, you know that there are thousands and thousands of rocks. But my eyes fell on one in particular, and it seemed to me to be a picture of my life. I picked it up and brought it home, and carried it with me in my car for a long time.

Why that rock? It's been broken and battered, but it's still a rock. It's been worn and rubbed smooth by the tumbling action of the creek, but it's still a rock. It's

been broken and tossed around, but it's still a rock. That rock became my memorial for that day, a reminder that God was still in control, and that even though the waters of trouble had washed over my head, and even though I was being tossed and crushed and broken, if I went deeper in Christ, I was still His, and He would always hold me close. I keep that rock within sight so I will always remember the truth I learned that day, and how God encouraged me through that experience.

It may not be a rock, but perhaps you have something like that which reminds you of a special time in your life when God came through for you, showing you something outside yourself, demonstrating to you that He is a great and powerful God. Perhaps you have a special photograph, or you planted a tree, or made a quilt, but it reminds you every time you see it that God loves you and has taken care of you throughout your life.

As the Hebrew people entered the Promised Land of Canaan, there was much excitement and joy. For forty years they and their fathers had been wandering around in the desert, a homeless race of nomads who daily lived under the knowledge that their present set of circumstances was a direct result of disobedience to God, the same God who had led them out of Egypt. Imagine the anticipation and eagerness as they crossed the Jordan River!

Joshua was excited, too. But there had to have been a certain degree of nervousness as he faced this monumental task of leading hundreds of thousands of temperamental Hebrews into a land where they had never been. Now remember, God had promised to bless them as long as they followed and obeyed Him.

But that was the catch. That was the problem in the first place—because there was a distinct possibility that once the people got into the land, once they became settled into their new environment, once they had conquered and subdued the enemies in the land, they would forget how it had come to be. There was a chance that in the years to come, perhaps after Joshua was dead, that the people would become so comfortable in their new home that they would lose sight of their past and the lessons it could teach them.

There was no real way to make certain this would not happen, as we know too well from our own experiences. So God had them do something that would help future generations remember how God had led them amazingly out of the land of Egypt and miraculously into the land of Canaan.

Following God’s orders, Joshua instructed twelve men, one from each of the twelve tribes, to go back into the river bed, pick up a stone from the area around where the priests still stood with the ark of the covenant, place it on his shoulder, and bring it to the bank of the river. When they came to the place where they spent their first night in the new land, Joshua had the twelve stones set up in a pile.

At first it doesn’t make much sense. So Joshua explained, “*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*” (Joshua 4:6-7).

Can’t you just hear it now? A father and son are walking past that pile of stones, when the little boy, at that age when he is just beginning to ask a lot of questions, turns his father and asks, “Daddy, what do these stones mean?” And the father replies, “Son, I’m glad you asked. These stones came from the middle of the Jordan River—when it was flooded!” And the little boy looks at his daddy with wide eyes and asks, “But how did you get them out from under the water?”

And the daddy, who knows the story well, because *his* daddy had told *him*, says, “Our people crossed the Jordan on *dry* ground! The Lord God dried up the Jordan and allowed us to cross, just as He had done to the waters of the Red Sea when our fathers left Egypt.”

It wasn’t the first time a pile of memorial stones had been set up. It was a common practice in the Old Testament. Jacob had done it with the stone which had been his pillow when he had the dream of the angels ascending and descending on the ladder. He wanted to memorialize the place as being a very special place. He even named it “Bethel” which means “House of God.”

Jacob and his father-in-law Laban had set up a pile of stones in Genesis 31 as a witness of the agreement they had made at Mizpah. And we have a hymn entitled, “*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.*” The second stanza begins “*Here I raise mine Ebenezer, Hither by Thy help I’m come; And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.*” What does “raise mine Ebenezer” mean?

Well, it’s based on 1 Samuel 7:12, where we find Samuel setting up a stone to memorialize the fact that God had routed the Philistines before the Israelites in a seemingly impossible situation. “Ebenezer” means “stone of help,” and Samuel gave it that name because whenever the people saw that stone they would

remember how God had helped them. As long as the stone was set up, the people, for generations, would remember.

That was the purpose here in Joshua 4. It was something Joshua would do at least three other times here in the book named after him. Each one of these examples was their way of making sure that they would not forget the things God had done for them. But here is an important point—it wasn't so much for themselves. It's not like the following week they would forget, or even in their entire lifetimes. Each time we see someone setting up a stone or a pile of stones in the Old Testament, it was in order that future generations would know how God had acted on their behalf. It was always done with an eye on those who followed them.

So let's make an application for us today. This is a story from the Old Testament, but it has at least two principles lying right on top for all of us to see.

1 The first principle is that there are people who are following along behind us, and it is vitally important that we leave a legacy for them.

We should consider those follow us, and we should seek to provide for them when we are gone. We are what we are today because of decisions made yesterday by those who went before us. Turn that around. What we will be tomorrow, good or bad, will be because of decisions we make today.

How many of you were members of this church in 1954? Then you will remember the extensive construction which was done on this building at that time. The original church was built in 1901, but by the early 1950s the sanctuary needed extensive repair. Our pastor was Robert Gerrard, who led the congregation to brick the building, add central heating and cooling, add the porch on the front of the building, build the choir loft and baptistery, and completely renovate the inside. What did all that cost? \$54,000. Today that doesn't sound like too much money for all that work, but \$54,000.00 in 1954 had the same buying power as \$433,503.57 in 2010. And that was when the average annual income for a head of household was only \$3,200 (equivalent to about \$25,600 today). What a leap of faith those people took! And we are the beneficiaries of all their vision and sacrifices long years later.

The point is that most of those people who were here and paid for that work to be done, did so knowing that there were others who would come along behind them to enjoy their work and sacrifice. So let's put a little child outside, watching the

workmen with his father, watching all that activity going on in 1954. And let's hear that child ask his father, "What is all this about? Why are we doing all this?" The father would say, "We're building and improving the place where we worship God and study the Bible, so that future generations will also have a place to worship God and study the Bible."

If you will think about it, in your *personal* life there are blessings and benefits you enjoy because of someone else who has gone before you. You may live in a house you built yourself, but most of us live in houses built by someone else. You didn't build the car you drive—someone else did. You don't manufacture the medication you take—someone else does. You don't generate the electricity or filter the water—someone else does. We depend on so many others for our daily living. And in the same way, there are others—people we may not even know yet—who will be depending on us today. Your children and grandchildren will be heavily influenced, believe it or not, by the choices and decisions you make in your own personal life today.

Listen! If it is true that all of our yesterdays have determined today, then it is also true that our todays will determine our tomorrows.

2 The second principle is that this something we are to do together.

You'll notice that Joshua didn't just select twelve of the strongest men at random and have them carry the stones from the Jordan. In verse two we see that God told Joshua to "*choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe.*" That was extremely significant. Remember that two and one-half tribes had already secured their inheritance on the other side of the Jordan. But this memorial of stones wasn't to have eight or nine stones in it. No! All twelve tribes of Israel were to be represented, because God wanted them to always remember that they were in this together. He wanted the pile of stones to not only remind them that He is great and powerful, and brought them across the flooded Jordan, but that they *all* came across! They were to address the obstacles and challenges before them as one.

And so should we in our day. Is your family facing a challenge? Face it together. Is there a couple here today who is constantly at odds with one another? You will not solve your problems until you learn to face them together. And what about our church? What we do, the challenges we may face, we should face them together. The unity of the Bride of Christ is an important theme in the New Testament, and it

is still true to this day that the church which works together, and sees itself as a unit, is the church which advances and is victorious. We are not young and old, rich or poor, long-time member and new member, educated and uneducated—we are the church, the Bride of Christ, the Flock of God, the Family of God, the Body of Christ. We are one, and together we are to pick up the stones of memorial and leave something for those who follow.

Charles Franklin Kettering was an inventor in the early half of the 20th century. He was head of research for General Motors for 27 years, founded Delco, and was responsible for the invention of Freon refrigerant. He was the one who invented the electric starter for automobiles, so we don't have to hand-crank our cars! In 1949 he wrote, "We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there." Sounds like he really believed it.

Symphony conductor Sir John Barbirolli once gave his autograph to a young soldier during the intermission of a concert during World War II. As Barbirolli handed the autograph to the soldier, the young man commented, "Sir, it is a very good concert—so far." Barbirolli said that he never forgot those two words, "so far." They served to remind him that he should never relax the standards he had set for himself or his orchestra.

In all these years, Utica Baptist Church has been a "very good church—so far." Let us never forget that our church will be determined by the things you and I do and say here in the present.

I have a rock and a photograph that reminds me of God's love and faithful care for me, even during extremely dark times. They mean something to me personally, but they won't mean anything to my children or grandchildren. So what kind of memorial to God's faithfulness in my life will I leave for them? What kind of memorial to God's faithfulness will you leave for those who follow you?

And what is there about our church—our facilities, our ministry, what we stand for—that will point others to the Gospel after we are gone? Should the Lord delay His coming, will there be someone who drives by our building in twenty-five years who will ask the question, "Look at that building over there—I wonder what that used to be?"

That's a pretty sobering thought, that the day could ever come when we all would be gone and our building empty. But let us never take for granted that we will always be here or that we will always be effective. There are choices we must

make, decisions we must face, and sacrifices we must make to make sure that generations to come have a strong, viable witness and ministry here in Utica.

So what do we do now? We must realize that there are people who follow us who will need a strong Christian witness in days to come. And we must work together to make it happen.

Two men were seated together, quietly talking in one end of a lifeboat. At the other end, others were furiously bailing water out of the boat. One man remarked to the other, “Aren’t you glad that the hole is not on our end?”

Sadly, there are many in the church of God today who have that kind of attitude. We very gladly enjoy the blessings, both spiritual and material, that have been handed down to us by those who went before. But seldom do we think that we are now that generation which should be preparing to pass it on to the ones who follow after us. The hole may not be in our end of the boat, but it *is* our boat, and we are affected by what happens.