

Joshua 4—Cherishing God’s Work in Our Lives

Welcome to ABC. I pray that our time together will be pleasing to God. Let’s Pray.

Today’s passage about crossing the Jordan and establishing new ground with memorial markers is pertinent in 2020, as many people and churches have entered all kinds of new territory, and are having to establish markers or other things to “hang on to” in order to navigate strange waters. For example, the phrase “that’s so 2020” will likely be with us for some time to come in reference to unforeseen and often negative things. Our church as well, has done all kinds of new things in the last while, and are “crossing over” so to speak as we transition to a new pastor sometime in the next 6 months or so. We had already started the process back in December when Pastor Eric announced his call to Montana, and were into the continued process in March when Pastor Roger was here. Then things got paused quite dramatically as we all know. Now we’re back at it, and like the Israelites we need some reminders and markers to maintain the course. Our mission statement and things like {the words on the wall} help with that.

It’s also Communion Sunday, and that too, is a huge reminder for us as Christians about the price that was paid for our eternal salvation. Once per month we pause to remember and reflect on what Jesus did to glorify His father, but also to provide an escape route for his children. The bread and the cup remind us that our debt is paid in full. It also reminds us that we are a part of a long and detailed story which is primarily God’s story. We all have a type of spiritual amnesia. Evidence for this can be as simple as arguing about lunch in the parking lot, right after hearing a great sermon. You’ve probably never done that! “Remember” in the Bible means to “focus on, or reflect with love and devotion”. We could all use some more of that, also.

Each one of us also has their own story, and those stories are the one thing that doubt and critics can never steal from us. When God authentically entered your life, and my life, something changed that might be difficult to explain, or might feel natural to some. Critics of God’s word, and God’s people, simply cannot argue against how someone’s heart, and hopefully behaviour changes after He claims them for his own. Many times the person themselves cannot even explain it fully.

It was 20 years ago, in May 2000 that God finally “closed the deal” on my heart. (NOT to say that I have arrived, because I certainly have not). Tanya and I had been “exploring” the Bible for around a year, and one day while walking to work, I was just finally overcome with this sense of knowing (I hesitate to say feeling) that Jesus was right, and I was in eternal peril if I did not submit to that truth by recognizing that I was wrong, and he was right. I can remember exactly where I was walking, and even the name of the dog—Godfrey—that lived at that house I was standing by, at the time. I can also clearly recall the moment after work that day when I got home and told Tanya that “I think I’m a Christian now”. After

explaining to her what I just told you, she said “you need to go to talk to someone”--almost like I needed a diagnosis about some new ailment! So that Sunday I showed up early to the church we’d been attending—Centre Street Church in Calgary—and basically grabbed the first guy I saw with name tag, and said “I need to talk to someone, because I think I’m a Christian now”. After the shocked guy passed me on to someone else, that second guy looked through some scripture with me (What I later learned was the Roman Road) and being satisfied with my responses, declared that my sense of being a Christian was authentic, and scheduled another meeting to begin a discipleship process that led me to here, 20 years later. The point is that God has also written a story, with mile markers and fence posts to help us overcome our spiritual amnesia. It’s good to remember where we came from.

Let’s review where we’ve been lately. In Joshua One we saw that the Lord gave Joshua some new marching orders after the death of Moses. They had turned a 14 day walk into 40 years of wandering, and God told them to “be strong and courageous...{and not to} be frightened, and not {to be} dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (verse 9) . In Joshua 2 we saw how God uses unexpected people like Rahab, and that people who are faithful to God will be rewarded for that where it says “...if you do not tell this business of ours, then when the Lord gives us the land, we will deal kindly with you” (verse 14). Last week in Chapter 3 we saw how they crossed the Jordan, and the Lord established their new ground by saying in verse 7, “today I will begin to exult you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”. All of these things apply to us here today also—we should be strong and courageous, as God uses unexpected people like us, and is with us, even now, to further his plan.

Let’s get into the passage now...

Verse 1 begins “When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua,--Here we see a personal and intimate interaction between God and Joshua. Furthermore, the Jordan, as we have heard is an important geopolitical and symbolic barrier in Israel. Crossing it was also not easy due the steep banks and volume of water. It was quite an accomplishment for them. Many cultures and belief systems and mythologies also use “crossing a river” as a symbolic representation of death, and in a way a new beginning is the death of the old.

Verse 2 continues with....“Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, ³ and command them, saying, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.’” --Once again we see the use of a group of 12 men, or tribes, or as in the NT, disciples. God’s word is full of connected and reflective ideas. It’s amazing that way. He commands them to “take” 12 stones, which is similar to

how Jesus “took” the bread at the Last Supper. God establishes His possession of His people by “taking” them, or having them “take things. Many of the people in the Bible were commanded to take or not take things. Adam and Eve were not to take the fruit. Moses had to take the tablets. David had to take up his sling. Jesus’ followers were to take up their nets, and later their crosses. All of these things are also physical symbols, and reminders.

You can see this stone here—show it—this is from the Rust family homestead in the RM of Stonehenge, which is about 60 miles south of Moose Jaw. This is from the well that my great grandfather Martin Rust, who apparently was a devout Baptist, built with his own hands just before WW1. I took Tanya to the homestead to visit my great uncle John, when Sarah was a baby, and we took, with his permission, some of the stones from the dry well, as a reminder of where I had come from. I find it very meaningful to think that my roots in Canada were established by a man that fled religious persecution in Europe in the late 1800s, and “took up” new land in Canada to create new opportunities and safety for his family. Many of us here have similar stories. I only show this stone as an illustration of people establishing those reminders, like we discussed before.

Continuing on in verse 4, “Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. --Joshua showed obedience to God by quickly doing what the Lord instructed him to do. Sometimes our obedience needs to be hasty.

Then in 5, {And}Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, ---As we heard last week, the ark contained manna, the 10 commandments and the staff of Aaron--The very first time I heard of the “ark of the covenant” was of course back in 1981 when the all-time classic movie “Raiders of the Lost Ark” was released. I would not say that I knew very much about the historical origins of the “lost ark” before that time, but I certainly recall leaving the theatre having been blown away by that cinematic experience, and the continued roguishness of Harrison Ford-Han Solo—Indiana Jones. After seeing the tremendous power of the ark I also recall

thinking that IF such an ark existed and had the kind of power displayed in the movie, that it was in fact an incredible manifestation of God's power. I certainly had no idea at that time that 39 years later that I'd be here, doing this, but now I can say that God establishes his paths and ways in our hearts, often a long time before he enacts the actual plan. I watched that movie 100s of times prior to my previously mentioned "sidewalk conversion", and I sort of began to realize at age 30 how God works in the lives of His people even when they don't know it.

⁶ that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever."--As we've seen, God's story is long and involved and requires reminders. We may not have actual stones, nor may we see the Red Sea or the Jordan parted, but we certainly can see the miraculous conversion of people we know or read about, and our legacy will pass on; either closer to God's plan, or further away. As God works in our hearts, we need to respond, as we'll be prompted to do shortly with the Lord's Supper. Also, as I said earlier, a person's "coming to faith" story is one thing that cannot be explained away by doubters, since it usually involves something miraculous, and is possibly quite dramatic.

⁸ And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the LORD told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down there. --There's a repetition here, which is common, especially on the OT, to emphasize certain ideas. The people obeyed, and established their place in the new land—a public declaration of God's place in their lives—just like baptism and communion are public declarations.

⁹ And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day. --The phrase “to this day” obviously does not necessarily mean until August 2, 2020, but instead intends the idea of a long lasting reminder of what God did for his people, or a person. For example, John Newton’s “Amazing Grace” was written as a personal repentance of his slave trading background, but we today are still “vile wretches” in need of the same saving grace.

¹⁰ For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua.

The people passed over in haste. --God’s timing is at work here, as is the peoples’ obedience to his commands, via Joshua—we see them pass over in haste, too—sometimes we need to go for it, and do what he is prompting us to do.

¹¹ And when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the LORD and the priests passed over before the people. --the leaders stay in place, and in danger of the potential rushing waters—then once the people cross, they go too. Jesus went before us, and then paved the path for us to follow—then he returned to ascend to heaven, fully defeating death for his children. That way, we too, can “cross the Jordan” twice—once in this life when we’re justified; then at the end when we’re fully sanctified upon our physical death.

¹² The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them. ¹³ About 40,000 ready for war passed over before the LORD for battle, to the plains of Jericho. --Reuben and Gad and Manasseh were not exactly the poster children of faithfulness, and they should have

listened to the reminders of the stones a little better, as their stories became largely lost, later on. They did prepare for war, as we should be ready for persecution today. I also always wonder about the numbers we see in the Bible—like 40,000—how did they count them? It's not a deal breaker in any way, but things like that do add to the mysterious part of God's word. It's our fallen nature that demands logic and answers about the wrong things. In context, the number, whether 38k, or 40k, or 42,587, doesn't really matter. What does matter is that they were obedient and we must be obedient. Sometimes if we would just listen better, or faster, at least some of problems would perhaps diminish.

¹⁴ On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him just as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.--Being exalted by God is quite an amazing thing in this life, and Joshua's obedience should continue to be inspirational. The crossing of the Jordan was a joyous culmination of a long time of wandering. We all need to be leaders in our various circles of influence so that we can be a part of God's plan to lead his people to their "new land".

¹⁵ And the LORD said to Joshua, ¹⁶ "Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan." --The Lord continues his intimate and personal connection to Joshua, with new commands, as well as the continued focus on the evidence of God's story—testimony—in their lives.

¹⁷ So Joshua commanded the priests, "Come up out of the Jordan." ¹⁸ And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before.--Joshua passes along what was told to him, and after they are safely across, the waters return making the place dangerous, once again. If Jesus had not gone before us, and paid the price, we would be unable to cross over in this life, or the next. Our works are befouled and confused with improper motivations, even if only internal.

¹⁹ The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. --"Gilgal" means circle of stones, and was mentioned 39 times in Joshua—the first month was the month prior to the passover, which has many symbolic connections to this book, and passage.

²⁰ And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. --the commands from the start of the chapter are brought to fruition, and we see the evidence of their obedience. The reminders are there for them. Just like the cross and the Lord's Supper before us.

²¹ And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' ²² then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' ²³ For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, ²⁴ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever." --These words are still applicable today, as children ask about the importance of what happened in the times before them, especially if their parents had some "Jordans" of their own to cross, and some new land to claim. We also see that the reach of the Lord is expanded to 'all the peoples' of the earth" so that they may know and fear the Lord—at the time that would have meant their known world, but obviously Jesus expanded the circle in His time, and today, as we are to make disciples of all of the nations., all around the globe. Not for our purposes, but for His.

Closing -- This custom hot dog stick, also built my great uncle John has a handle made from caragana wood, taken from the wind row of caragana bushes also planted by his dad and my great grandfather Martin Rust back around WW1. Like the Israelites, we all like, and need reminders of where we've come from. Let us always remember with love and fondness, what God has done in our lives. And let that propel us forward to be in His will going ahead.

Prayer--