

*Remembering God's Faithfulness: Joshua 4*

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This morning we're going to talk about the importance of remembering. I'll start by asking you to consider the quality of your own memory. Memory is a mysterious part of who we are. Sometimes we forget things that we had meant to remember and needed to remember, wanted to remember—maybe someone's birthday or an anniversary. Other times our thoughts gravitate toward things we wish we could forget—painful memories from the past or hurtful words that someone had spoken to us. But our memories don't function like a hard drive on a computer. We can't just save the good memories and put the bad ones in the trash bin. It's more complex than that.

My grandmother passed away in 2010, after suffering from Alzheimer's for many years. Many aspects of her memory had declined over those years, but there were still memories that remained. Decades earlier in my grandmother's life she had made a project of writing memoirs of her mother's life. She would talk to her mom on the phone every Friday. And in her own handwriting she wrote out the story of her mom's life, who lost her parents at a very young age and then was adopted by a family in Germany, and then moved back to the States and married a man named Benjamin Graffin. My grandmother had written out all these memoirs of her mom's life.

My aunt Carol would read those memoirs to my grandmother in her final years and months of life, and there would be a connection. Many memories had faded and disappeared, but when those things were read to her, there was an obvious spark.

Interestingly, another thing that created a spark was music. My mom was sharing this with me on the phone just the other day. As the Alzheimer's progressed there was a point where my grandmother could not even put words together into a coherent sentence. But when she heard certain songs from the WWII era, all of a sudden she would begin singing right along, knowing the words to the songs.

The way the human memory works is, indeed, a fascinating thing. Writing things down is a great way to remember. Journaling can be a great benefit to us when, years down the road we can be reminded of what was happening, what we were

thinking about, what we were praying about, at a particular time. Music, too, can be a great tool for remembering.

It's very easy to forget many of the details of life. But when we read those old journals, or an old letter, or listen to an old song, those memories rush back. Or when we look at those old family pictures and watch family videos, we're reminded of what we were all like years ago.

We can be very forgetful people. We can forget where the car keys are, or a wallet or purse, or that book that we were just reading 10 minutes ago. Students forget facts that they needed to know for a test. We forget appointments sometimes. We forget details of past events. Sometimes Stacy and I will be thinking back to some event years ago, and we remember it a bit differently. I think it happened like this. No, I think it happened like this. Our memories are mysterious things.

When it comes to remembering God's faithfulness, we can be especially forgetful. One striking example of this is found in the book of Exodus, chapters 14 and 16. In the span of just a couple of chapters, we see the Israelites delivered from slavery and brought through the Red Sea, and then they are grumbling about not having food to eat.

You want to say to them, "Don't you remember what God just did for you! The water stood up like two walls and you walked through the Red Sea on dry ground! Don't you think that the God who can do that is also capable of giving you food to eat? Trust Him!"

We want to grab them by the shoulders and talk some sense into them. And then, of course, we remember that we do the same sort of thing. God brings us through some trial, answers some prayer, and within a few days it's almost forgotten. We're already looking to the next struggle on the horizon and finding reasons to gripe and complain.

We have to find ways of remembering God's faithfulness. We have to build into our lives routines and traditions that give us regular and vivid reminders of God's past faithfulness. And then, when the future looks grim, we can meditate on those memories and be assured that the God who has been so faithful in the past is the God who will remain faithful in the future. We can trust Him. He's going to come through for us again and again and again.

God is so gracious to us. He knows we have spiritual amnesia. He knows that we are forgetful. And so He gives us

memorials. He commands us to do certain things that will serve as reminders.

### **Remembering God’s Faithfulness**

This is what we see in Joshua 4. What we have in Joshua 4 is a narrative of the same event we read about in chapter 3—the Israelites crossing of the Jordan River. But chapter 4 focuses on a specific aspect of this great event, namely, the memorial stones that the Lord instructed them to set up. The people had been in a place called Shittim, east of the Jordan River. Then they experienced God’s great miracle of stopping the water many miles upstream, and this happened at the time of year when the river overflows its banks. Amazingly they walked across on dry ground!

Now they’re moving west toward Jericho, and they’re going to lodge at a place called Gilgal, a few miles west of the Jordan, between the Jordan River and the walled city of Jericho. And the instruction comes from the Lord, through Joshua, to the people that they are to gather 12 stones from the Jordan to set up as a memorial. One man from each tribe was selected to take a stone from the riverbed where the priests had stood with the ark of the covenant, and those stones were brought to Gilgal where Joshua set them up as a sign, as a remembrance, of what God accomplished for His people on that day.

One short comment on the translation of verse 9: There has been debate as to whether there were two sets of stones that were set up, or just one. The passage speaks clearly of stones that were to be set up at Gilgal, the place where they lodged that night (verse 3 and 8). And then verse 20 says that Joshua did just that, set up the stones at Gilgal.

But verse 9, on face value, seems to say that stones were set up right there in the river itself. Where there, in fact, 2 sets of stones, 2 memorials? That’s possible. What I think is more likely, though, is that verse 9 is meant to be read as the NIV translates it: *“Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.”* (Joshua 4:9, NIV)

So these stones were taken from the very place where the priests had stood. What a powerful visual reminder! These stones that maybe nobody had ever seen at any time in history, because they were submerged beneath the flowing waters of that river. And nobody would have ever seen them again once the waters

returned. But the Israelites saw those stones, walked across those stones, as they entered the Promised Land. And now those stones were set up as a monument to remember that defining event in their lives.

Let me ask you to reminisce through the events of your life. What are some events that you can look back on as a pile of stones marking a defining moment for you—a moment when God showed His power in your life, when He was guiding you in a very clear way, when He answered a prayer, fulfilled a promise. What are the things that come to mind? We have to work at this, since we're so forgetful. But's it worth the effort. It's worth the time sitting around with your spouse or other family members or friends, and sharing these stories with each other.

Saying, “Remember when we didn't have a clue what to do, or how we were going to make ends meet, or how the marriage was going to survive, or \_\_\_\_\_, and then God showed up in an amazing way! Wasn't that awesome!!!”

I'll share a couple of my personal stories with you now, and then I'd love it if you would share some of your stories with me as well. Talk to me after the service, or give me a call this week, or send me an email. Share with one another in your small groups. Let's be sharing these things with each other, as though we're setting up a pile of stones and saying, “God did that for us.”

I remember during my freshman year of college wrestling with what I was supposed to do with the rest of my life. I was a chemical engineering major taking physics and calculus courses and thinking I was on a path that made sense for me, given what I had enjoyed and done well at in high school. It seemed like a good career path. And it is a good career path for many. But I had an increasing sense that maybe God had something different in store for me. I was at a Christian college. I was growing a lot in my faith. I was really enjoying my Bible classes.

And I still remember pretty vividly the Sunday evening when God impressed upon me a calling to vocational ministry. I was at a chapel service that happened each Sunday night on campus. It was a student-led chapel called World Christian Fellowship. We would sing together and read Scripture and pray. And they would invite various speakers to come and talk about missions and ministry and what it means to be a “world Christian,” a Christian who is passionate about God's plan for the gospel to reach to the ends of the earth.

On that particular evening a man named Ron Hutchcraft was speaking. I don't remember most of what he said. But I remember that he spoke pretty directly to those of us who might be sensing a call from God to enter full-time Christian ministry of one kind or another, whether that meant planning for overseas mission work or pastoral ministry or something else. He challenged us to consider whether that might be the case in our lives. And if so, to make that commitment to the Lord. And I remember bowing my head that night and saying to God, "I'm willing. Here I am. I do sense that You're leading me in this direction, and I'm ready to go."

The following week I spoke with my parents on the phone, and they were very encouraging and affirming. I also spoke with my pastor from my home church, and he too was affirming. Over the coming years he gave me opportunities to teach and preach and gain some experience in ministry, which was extremely valuable.

That chapel service on that Sunday evening during the winter of my freshman year of college remains to this day to be like a pile of stones marking a defining moment in my life. I still look back on that and rejoice that God provided such a clear sense of direction.

Another moment that comes to mind is a conversation that happened about 3 years after that. Stacy and I were both seniors in college and we were dating seriously, but not yet engaged. On a spring afternoon we sat down together on a park bench outside of her apartment building in East Lansing, Michigan. With my heart pounding I asked her a big question. Not THE big question, not the "will you marry" question—that would come a few months later. But on this particular afternoon it was this question, "How do you feel about entering a life of ministry, a life of not knowing where we're going to live, not knowing if we'll be near extended family or not, a life of following wherever God may lead us? I can't guarantee that we're going to live near your parents. I can't guarantee you that we'll have a lot of money. But this is what God has called me to and I'm wondering if you're on board with that." I was very happy to hear her say that she was willing to follow me and support me in whatever God led us to do.

I knew she really loved me. Because all I had to my name was some college debt, a small but growing library of theological books, and Schwinn bicycle. So I look back on that conversation as another pile of stones marking God's faithfulness and direction. God has called Stacy and me to be together as husband and wife, as father and mother of our children, and as a team in ministry. I've never doubted that.

Those are a couple of my personal stories. Spend some time recalling your own personal stories, and share those with others.

Especially share those stories with the next generation. Share these stories with your children, with your nieces and nephews, with your grandchildren . . .

### **Proclaiming God's Faithfulness**

Look in our passage, in Joshua 4, at verses 6-7. And then look at verses 21-22. God means for us to remember His faithfulness and to declare His faithfulness to the next generation.

“One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.” (Psalm 145:4, ESV)

Let's remember. And let's tell. And let's be intentional about telling the next generation.

A really cool Christmas present that we got this year was from my parents, and it's a good example of this very thing. They put together a photo album (one of these things where you arrange it all online and then the company prints it and sends it to you). And it's really a meaningful album that they pieced together of our extended family. They record God's faithfulness over the past year and have specific prayers for each one of us and the things going on in our lives. It's a visual and memorable way of remembering God's faithfulness.

I'll mention a couple books, too, that you may be interested in. One is written by Noel Piper and is entitled *Treasuring God in Our Traditions*. Family traditions can be a wonderful way of remembering God's faithfulness. As you think about Christmas traditions and Easter traditions and birthday traditions and Thanksgiving traditions, be thinking about how you can incorporate traditions that tell the stories of God's faithfulness to the next generation.

Specifically with Thanksgiving, another book, and one that we've enjoyed as a family, is by Barbara Rainey called *A Time to Remember*. There's a CD that comes with it, too. And we usually read and / or listen to this each year around Thanksgiving. It tells the stories of the Pilgrims and their faith and God's provision for them as they settled in this new land.

So I would encourage you, as an application of this text in Joshua 4, to give thought to how you're going to declare God's mighty works to the next generation. In the everyday routine of

life and in the special occasions, let's be intentional about remembering God's faithfulness and sharing those stories with the children among us.

Turning now to another story of God's faithfulness, another thing that I want to share with you . . . is not about me, personally, but is about this church. There's a document that is very significant for this church that we've kept with us even as we've moved from building to building over the years. It's the original church covenant that was signed by all those who were part of this church when it began in the year 2000. Currently we have it hanging in the church office. And I've looked over this document many, many times and reflected on God's faithfulness to this body of believers. There are several folks who signed this document who are still members here 15 years later. A few of the last names have changed, as people got married.

This is a memorial, a pile of stones, for us. It's a marker of God's faithfulness in establishing this church and sustaining it through the joys and trials of life. We can look back on God's faithfulness over the years, and we can rest assured that God will continue to be faithful in the future.

### **The Lord's Supper**

And now I want to move to a deeper level of remembrance, an even more significant memorial of God's faithfulness, and that is remembering God's faithfulness to us in sending Jesus to die in our place on the cross.

In Joshua 4 the Lord instructed the Israelites to set up a pile of stones as a memorial. The word for memorial that's used in Joshua 4:7 is the same word that's used in Exodus 12 speaking of the Passover. And the Passover points forward to the Lord's Supper, which is a memorial that we're instructed to observe.

So for the next few minutes I want to say some things about the Passover and the Lord's Supper, and my hope is that this will heighten our appreciation of this act of remembrance the Lord has given us. We are forgetful people. So we need things like this, like the Lord's Supper, to be a reminder to us on a regular basis, of what the Lord has done for us.

Let's begin, then, in Exodus 12:1-14 where we read of the Passover. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord was about to deliver them. He had already inflicted Egypt with nine plagues, and He was preparing for the tenth and final plague.

What an amazing event this was! God was about to demonstrate His sovereign power over Egypt by striking down all the firstborn in the land. God's claim on the firstborn signifies His claim on the whole people. Everything and everyone belongs to the Lord, and He will do as He pleases. And in this situation He chose to severely punish the people of Egypt for their wickedness. What we also see here, though, is that the Egyptians were not the only ones who deserved punishment. The Israelites deserved punishment, too. They were sinners. They had wicked hearts. And they deserved to have their firstborn killed as well. This is an important point for all of us to realize, that we all deserve God's wrath because of our sin. You may read this account and question what the Egyptians did to deserve God's wrath. And the answer is: that's exactly what each and every one of us deserves from God. We deserve to die and to be separated from God's presence for ever and ever because we have rebelled against Him and dishonored His Holy Name.

But look at the provision the Lord made for His chosen people. He appointed a substitute, and the substitute was a lamb without blemish (verse 5). The lamb was killed, and its blood was put on the doorposts and lintel of the house so that when the Lord saw the blood He would divert His wrath. The lamb died in the place of the people. In the Passover God demonstrated His *justice* by showing His people that sin deserves death. And He also demonstrated His *grace* by providing for them a substitute.

Israel was to continue to celebrate the Passover meal each year as a memorial of their deliverance from Egypt. In this way they were to remember God's faithfulness. Each year they would be reminded of God's power to save—God's power that delivered them from slavery. And as they killed the lamb they would experience in a very graphic way the seriousness of sin, and they would also be pointed to the coming Messiah who would be the ultimate and final Passover Lamb.

When we come to the New Testament we hear John the Baptist say of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And Paul writes in 1 Cor 5:7 that "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." This is all part of the rich background that reveals the significance of the Lord's Supper. For it's no coincidence that Jesus instituted the ordinance of the Lord's Supper when He was eating the Passover meal with His disciples. This brings us to Luke 22:7-8, 14-20.

As the Israelites observed the Passover each year as a memorial of God's saving power, so we celebrate the Lord's Supper as a memorial of the salvation we have in Christ. And as



the Passover meal was a vivid reminder that the lamb died in the place of the people, so the Lord's Supper proclaims the glorious truth that Christ died for us. Notice what Jesus said about the bread and the cup, which represent His body and blood. In verse 19, "This is my body, *which is given for you.*" And in verse 20, "This cup *that is poured out for you* is the new covenant in my blood." What Jesus is describing here is at the very heart of the Gospel. It's the Good News that He died in our place. This is what the Passover foreshadowed, and it is what Jesus fulfilled in His death on the cross.

Therefore, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, one of things we're doing is proclaiming this Gospel message that Jesus died in our place. We're remembering and we're telling. In 1 Corinthians 11, where we have instructions concerning the Lord's Supper, it says "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." So when we take the piece of bread and the cup of juice, we are proclaiming the Gospel, to ourselves and to our children and to any unbelievers who may be among us. We are proclaiming in a tangible way the fact that Jesus offered Himself as the Passover Lamb to be slain on behalf of the people. He was killed, and His blood covers us, so that when God sees the blood His wrath is turned away.

So I would encourage us today, in this particular tradition, in this ordinance which our Lord gave to us, to appreciate this memorial meal. Thank the Lord today that He has commanded us to practice this. He knows we are quick to forget. We need reminders. We need this, to share in this act of remembering. We're remembering God's faithfulness. We're remembering specifically God's faithfulness in sending His Son to die for our sins: His blood shed for us, His body broken for us, this is what the cup and bread signify.

As we eat and drink together of this meal, we are remembering, we are celebrating, and we are proclaiming this great truth that God has been so faithful to His people.