

Monuments are Built to Commemorate the Crossing of the Jordan River

Joshua 4

Joshua 4:1-24 - *“And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying: ² “Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from every tribe, ³ and command them, saying, ‘Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.”*”

⁴ Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; ⁵ and Joshua said to them: *“Cross over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, ⁶ that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ ⁷ Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.”*

⁸ And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. ⁹ Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the Ark of the Covenant stood; and they are there to this day.

¹⁰ So the priests who bore the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the LORD had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua; and the people hurried and crossed over. ¹¹ Then it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over, that the ark of the LORD and the priests crossed over in the presence of the people. ¹² And the men of Reuben, the men of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses had spoken to them. ¹³ About forty thousand prepared for war crossed over before the LORD for battle, to the plains of Jericho. ¹⁴ On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they had feared Moses, all the days of his life.

¹⁵ Then the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, ¹⁶ *“Command the priests who bear the ark of the Testimony to come up from the Jordan.”* ¹⁷ Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, *“Come up from the Jordan.”* ¹⁸ And it came to pass, when the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD had come from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet touched the dry land, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before.

¹⁹ Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. ²⁰ And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal. ²¹ Then he spoke

to the children of Israel, saying: "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?'²² then you shall let your children know, saying, 'Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land';²³ for the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over,²⁴ that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever."

Background Notes

Setting up stones as memorial markers was common in Old Testament times. We build stone monuments to mark historic events today as well, right? In Old Testament times these stone markers were sometimes a single stone, and sometimes groups of stones, as here in Joshua 4.

Setting up a large stone or group of stones marks the place as significant because a covenant was made there, or as a reminder of an important event. Jacob set up a pillar as a commemoration of the dream that God had given him at Bethel. Genesis 28:18 - "Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it." When Israel defeated the Philistines, Samuel set up a stone in commemoration of that event. 1 Samuel 7:12 - "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." In Joshua 24:26 we read, "Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD." So it was not unusual to set up stones as markers, and we find this practice in many places in the Old Testament.

Here in Joshua 4 two sets of stones were set up: two memorial markers of twelve stones each to remind the people of the event of crossing the Jordan River. The first set of twelve stones was taken from the riverbed where the priests were standing with the Ark. They were set up in Gilgal, on the west side of the Jordan River (Joshua 4:8, 20). The second set of twelve stones was set up in the midst of the Jordan River, where the Ark was standing as the people crossed over (v9).

Some translations make it appear that only one set of stones was set up, but I think verse 9 indicates that two twelve-stone markers were set up – one in the riverbed and one on the west side of the river at Gilgal. Why two sets of twelve stone markers? The answer brings us to our doctrinal points.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. Believers are united with Christ in His death.

Where do we see that truth taught here? We see it in the spiritual picture that we have in Joshua 4. In our Talk on Joshua 3, we mentioned that the Ark of the Covenant is a picture of Christ as our Leader and our Savior. The waters of the Jordan are a spiritual picture of the waters of death. The Ark had to go into the waters of the Jordan in order for the

people to enter the Promised Land, the land of blessing. The Lord Jesus had to pass through the waters of death in order to pay the penalty for our sins and open the way into the land of blessing for believers.

Now remember - in this spiritual picture in Joshua, the land of Canaan does not represent heaven in the future, but the “heavenly places” now. “Heavenly places” is the realm of spiritual realities that we enter when we become Christians. This is where we enjoy our spiritual blessings in Christ; this is also the sphere of spiritual battles.

Now what about the two sets of stones? The reason for twelve stones is obviously representation – one stone for each tribe in Israel (v5). The twelve stones that were set up in the riverbed clearly meant that the twelve tribes of Israel were identified with the place where the Ark had been, in the Jordan River.

Do you see the spiritual picture? In the same way, we are identified with Christ. We are united with Christ in His death; this is our spiritual position in Christ. He entered the waters of death for us, and now God sees us as having died with Christ. When He died, we died too, because He died as our substitute. We are identified and united with Him in that death. Believers are united with Christ in His death.

2. Believers are united with Christ in His resurrection.

We’ve seen that the twelve stones in the riverbed speak of our identification with Christ in His death. The twelve stones on the riverbank, where the Ark came up out of the river, speak of our identification with Christ in His resurrection. The twelve stones on the west shore were set up in the Land. We could call it the “resurrection side” of the Jordan River.

What a beautiful picture of our spiritual position in Christ! We are not only identified with Him in His death, but also in His resurrection. Romans 6:5-11 says, *“For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,⁶ knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.⁷ For he who has died has been freed from sin.⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him,⁹ knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him.¹⁰ For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.¹¹ Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

All of these truths from Romans 6 are portrayed in the spiritual picture that we have in Joshua 4. The setting up of the stones had historical significance then – and it has spiritual significance for the believer today as well.

Romans 6:11 indicates that we are not just to enjoy the spiritual picture, but we are live out these truths: *“Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Believers are united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Practical Applications

1. Have you come to the place in your Christian life where you've said, "No turning back?"

Verse 18: *"And it came to pass, when the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD had come from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet touched the dry land, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before."* There was no turning back now; they were committed.

Are you committed? We often sing, *"I have decided to follow Jesus -- no turning back... The cross before me; the world behind me. No turning back, no turning back."* That song is a hymn of discipleship. Do we mean it?

Are you committed to possessing the land of spiritual blessings, and entering the land where the spiritual battles are? The blessings are to be enjoyed and the battles are to be won, and we're guaranteed victory if we're committed to following our Lord. Have you come to the place in your Christian life where you've said, "No turning back"?

2. Take time to tell your children about the markers.

Verses 21-23: *"Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: 'When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?''²² then you shall let your children know, saying, 'Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land';²³ for the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over..."* The Israeli parents were to tell their children what the stone markers were all about, and we should do the same. Our first responsibility as parents is to teach our children the gospel of Jesus Christ, and help them to come to Christ as the personal Savior. But we also need to share with our children what God has done for us in our lives – especially significant answers to prayer, and events where the Lord is obviously involved in an unusual way. These are spiritual benchmarks. Share these markers with your children!

Here's an illustration: our daughter Catherine has started a project where all of us in the family, from grandparents on down, are to write up one or more significant events in our lives where God obviously was at work in our lives in an unusual way. She's going to put it together in a family book. It's a great idea! Maybe you would like to do the same. Take time to tell your children about the markers.