

Remembering God's Works

Joshua 3:14-4:9

FIRST THOUGHTS

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. It was so that they would never forget who God is, never forget they belonged to Him, and always remember they could trust Him in the present and for the future.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Joshua instructed the people to consecrate themselves in preparation for the crossing. Taking the lead, the priests carried the ark of the covenant, the sacred box that represented God's presence among the Israelites.

KEY DOCTRINE

God

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

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

The Jordan was at flood stage; but, when the priests' feet touched the water, the river's downstream flow was cut off. The entire nation crossed the Jordan on dry ground. This miraculous crossing glorified God and affirmed Joshua as His chosen leader. The Lord established Joshua at the Jordan just as He had established Moses at the Red Sea.

On the west side of the Jordan, the Israelites followed God's directions and build a monument of twelve stones carried out of the river. Each stone represented a tribe of Israel, and the memorial itself served as a reminder of God's power and provision. When the Israelites' children asked about the stones, the older generation could tell them about what God had done for His people that day.

DRY GROUND (JOSHUA 3:14-17)

As Israel ***broke camp to cross the Jordan***, Joshua instructed the people to consecrate themselves. The officers also commanded them to follow the priests when they saw the ***ark of the covenant*** being moved (3:3-6). Meanwhile, God told Joshua personally that He would exalt him in the eyes of the people (3:7). The Israelites would know the Lord was with Joshua just as He had been with Moses.

The Hebrew phrase translated *broke camp* more literally means "pulled up tents." After the people consecrated themselves (3:5), the priests bearing the *ark of the covenant* led the Israelites' march across the river. The ark reminded the Israelites of God's presence with them.

The comment that ***the Jordan overflows its banks throughout the harvest season*** enhances the miracle that follows. The statement adds a measure of tension by implying that the upcoming event would defy the laws of nature. This was also *harvest season*, a time when the Jordan River normally exceeded its flood stage.

As soon as the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into the Jordan, ***the water flowing downstream stood still***. These waters rose ***in a mass that extended as far as Adam***, a city located at least fifteen miles north of the Israelites' crossing point. With the waters from upstream stymied, the water flowing downstream quickly emptied into the Dead Sea.

The wall of water upstream left nothing but ***dry ground*** for God's people. The priests with the ark stood on ***dry ground in the middle of the Jordan*** where water had flowed moments earlier. In addition, ***all Israel*** could cross into the promised land on dry ground. The fact that the entire nation crossed on dry ground when the river was at flood stage stresses the miraculous nature of the event. We can be sure that God never fails to provide perfectly for His people during their time of need.

MEMORIAL STONES (JOSHUA 4:1-7)

The Lord commanded Joshua to choose **twelve men**, one representing **each tribe** of Israelites. Stones taken from **where the priests are standing** in the middle of the riverbed provided additional evidence that the river's water had indeed stopped in its place, allowing Israel to cross. The Lord commanded that His people take the twelve stones and **set them down at the place where you spend the night**. The Hebrew verb rendered *set them down* relates to the word "rest." The concept of Israel's "rest" after years of wandering in the wilderness is a key theme in Joshua.

Joshua instructed the men to go to the **ark of the Lord your God** in the middle of the river and to take a stone from that spot. The twelve found the stones close to where the priests were standing with the ark. Joshua's reference to the twelve stones as corresponding to the number of **Israelite tribes** echoes God's words and calls attention to Israel's unity. They were one nation, not twelve independent tribes. The Lord's presence with His people, symbolized by the ark, is a repeated theme in chapters 3–4.

The stones served as a **sign** for the current generation and their descendants. The Hebrew term for *sign* can signify an unusual event. These particular stones would direct people back to God's miraculous work in that spot. The Lord intended these stones to elicit questions about spiritual matters (see Deut. 6:4–9, 20-25).

The stones were a **memorial**. The Hebrew term is derived from "to remember." They functioned as a visual reminder of the dramatic way the Lord had helped His people. By reminding Israel of God's work, the stones pointed future generations toward a deeper faith in Him.

LASTING REMINDERS (JOSHUA 4:8-9)

This verse affirms the Israelites' obedience to the Lord's command through Joshua. They acted in accord with what **Joshua had commanded** them. The Hebrew verb translated *commanded* appears in the Old Testament with both God and human beings as its subject. It reflects a solidly structured society in which leaders received the right to rule by God's command (see 2 Sam. 7:7).

Under God's authority, a leader then had the power to command the people and to expect their obedience (see Josh. 1:9, 16). In essence, obedience to the leader reflected obedience to God. Likewise, disobedience to a leader established by God was tantamount to rebellion against the Lord.

When the Lord commands something to be done, He never fails to equip His people to do it. Also, He never forgets what He has commanded. God carefully fulfills every responsibility related to His instructions (1 Chron. 16:14–18). As God's chosen leader, Joshua acted as a true biblical prophet, although he is never identified in that spiritual office. Still, like other biblical leaders, he served as the Lord's messenger for Israel, sharing His words with His people.

The **twelve men** carried their stones from the **middle of the Jordan** to the place where they camped. As noted, each stone represented one of **the Israelite tribes**. After the number seven, the number *twelve* stands out as the most significant number appearing in Scripture. Twelve tribes constituted the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Jesus chose twelve disciples to be with Him and learn from Him.

The inspired writer's emphasis was on the lasting nature of the memorial. Even though the Jordan returned to its normal flow, the monument was **still there** when the story was recorded. The memorial would serve as a testimony of the awesome God who led His people across a flooded river into the land He had promised them. God still expects believers to remember Him and to testify to what He has done for them.

Next Week – Winning Strategy, Joshua 6:12-25

