

Christian Life Builders' Class
 Sunday School 9-13-2026

Memorial Stones and Living Stones Witness to the Power of God Joshua 3-5, I Peter 2

Introduction:

The devotionals from *Reflecting God* for this week have had us reading from chapters 2, 3, and 4 of Joshua, which take us from Joshua's opening speech, to the actual arrival into the land God had promised Abraham, by another miraculous crossing of a major body of water. One of the final things we mentioned last week was God's statement to Joshua, "I will be with you as I was with Moses." It would appear that the author of Joshua based these early chapters of the book, in part, on that statement, because we see here about five ways in which God does the same thing with Joshua that he did with Moses. A few examples, from our reading this week: Joshua sends spies into the land; the people cross the Jordan river at flood stage; God exalts Joshua in the eyes of the people as he did Moses. Other examples that will come later: they will celebrate the Passover; Joshua will receive a personal vision from God, a theophany, giving him instructions for what's coming ahead. There is a sense in which the writer of the book of Joshua wants his readers to see Joshua as a fulfillment of God's promise to send a prophet after Moses to take his place (a statement found near the end of Deuteronomy, by the way). Indeed, Joshua was "a fulfillment" of that promise. That doesn't mean, however, that the prophecy has only one possible fulfillment. One of the reasons the Gospel according to Matthew is the first book of the New Testament is that its very structure indicates that Jesus is also a new Moses (it should be noted, too, that Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua).

The devotional reading for Monday this past week, recounted the spies sent by Joshua into Jericho, who stayed at the house of Rahab, the inn-keeper who apparently offered certain "services" to her customers, for a fee, of course. In the preparation of this lesson, I discovered I do have a commentary on Joshua in my library. It's a commentary in which the writer is analyzing the book of Joshua in relationship to what it does in direct correlation to the content of the book of Deuteronomy. Of its 76 pages on the whole book of Joshua, 6 of them are an analysis of this episode of the spies staying with Rahab. There are a couple of observations I want to make about the events as recorded, and then I'd like to add what the commentator is saying about this incident and what it says about the whole book of Joshua.

First, the observations. When the king's men come to Rahab's inn, looking for the Hebrew spies, she sends them east as though they had gone back to their camp across the Jordan. The text says the king's men go as far as the fords of the Jordan river. Another translation has 'shallow ford' of the Jordan river. That's an important thought, and I'll come back to that later. Then, the text says she sends the spies into the hill country. The hill country is to the west of Jericho and that's a steep climb up for the Jordan valley. Jericho is at 850 ft below sea level, whereas the climb to the hill country would involve going up about 2000 ft.

Most of the events in the future of Israel will take place in that hill country, indicating that the spies might also have learned some important information there, too, even though the book doesn't mention anything about that.

Last week, I introduced to you the idea of points of view in the text, and used the texting shorthand of POV. As I worked with this commentary I hadn't read before, I noticed immediately its presentation of points of view, in particular in this episode of Rahab and the Hebrew spies. The commentary actually wove together the two ideas of POV and the idea of not straying either to the left or to the right of the command of God. I saw this presentation as integral to understanding the book of Joshua as a whole. So, I want to take a bit of time working in chapter 2 before going on to the printed lesson for today.

1. Breaking the commandment?? Joshua 2:8-14

The positive result of sending the spies into Jericho is that which is found in verses 9-10, where Rahab says, "great fear has fallen on . . . all who live in this country. We have heard how the LORD. . . ." If there had been any lack of courage motivating Joshua to send the spies, that statement took care of it. However, something else appears to be going on here as well. The command they were not to stray from was to put everything and everyone under the ban. But here, the very first time any Hebrews come into direct contact with one of the occupants of this new territory, a person of questionable reputation at best, they promise to spare her life and that of her family, and then even enter into covenant with her. Is this not straying one way or the other from the command they had been given? And, despite the deviation, Joshua honored their actions and their promise to Rahab.

I don't agree with everything this commentator says as it treats this episode, but I like the point he makes with it. He says that it introduces us to two ways of looking at how to follow the word/command Israel had been given: either with *authoritarian dogmatism* or *critical traditionalism*. The first is basically, strictly to the letter. The other is applying critical analysis to specifics. The commentator immediately presents this episode as a dramatic new presentation of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Here, Rahab and her family are seen as the undeserving people like Israel being approached by God, with the spies taking on the role of God offering grace and salvation in response to a nascent faith, and then engaging with them in a covenant of life based on their promised faithfulness to Israel. Instead of responding to God's command with a blind adherence to the letter of the command, the spies (Joshua included) respond with some kind of critical thinking. By the time the book of Joshua was written, Jewish tradition would have been in full swing, and Israel's history would have been full of other episodes where critical thinking had been exercised in the carrying out of tradition rather than strictly authoritarian dogmatism. The commentator challenges us to look for instances in the book of Joshua when the POV of the conquered people takes the place of that of the people of Israel. He asks us to examine when the will of God might need to supersede a dogmatic, letter-of-the-law approach to a very broad, potentially vague command, preferably without going too far in the opposite direction, from grace to condemnation, which, unfortunately, is what was to happen quite frequently in Israel's history.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

How does Scripture eventually lend validity to the decision of the spies to spare Rahab?

Now, let's get into the texts for today's lesson.

II. Crossing the Jordan. Joshua 3:9-17

The first thing we need to know about this text is the geography of the area and its resulting agricultural calendar. Seven days after Israel crossed the Jordan, God stopped providing the daily portion of manna. Since it was harvest time (specifically the barley harvest, with other crops coming on soon afterward), Israel was responsible for providing their own food from that which was ready for the picking, so to speak. We're dealing with the time of year that we would call early to middle Springtime. The traditional agriculture year in Israel was that of preparing the land in late Summer, planting in the Fall, growing season throughout the Winter, and harvest in Spring and early Summer. In Summer, the land remains fallow, because, crops can't grow then because it's too hot and it doesn't rain. The first time I was in Israel was Christmas of 1994, and the fields were in the middle of their growing stage.

Historically, the Jordan river is counter-productive as a source of water for agriculture. Because the source of the Jordan River is melting snow at the base of Mount Hermon plus other tributaries that carry rain water into it, it doesn't have much water at all until fall rains come. Even then, the river is hardly any wider than a highway lane most of the year. The text we cited from Joshua 2, that the king's soldiers went as far as the shallow fords of the Jordan, would indicate that there are places as far south as Jericho where a person could walk across the river at certain times of the year without worrying about getting swept away. The land on both sides of the river is excellent for agriculture with one major problem.

ASK: Since the main source of the water for the Jordan river is snow-capped Mount Hermon, at what time of year would the Jordan be at its fullest due to the melting snow?

Right! That means any crops growing along the banks of the river would be under water, because the river, as far south as Jericho, expands to a mile or more wide. That also eliminates any natural fords for crossing the river. Thus, the necessity of an act of God to get His people across at that time of year.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What takes the place of Moses' staff this time as the means of stopping the water from flowing? What is the positive feature of that fact? What might be a negative feature of it?
2. Whose faith was tested the most this time? How was it tested? Note: the town of Adam is about 20 miles north of Jericho.
3. NOTE: there is a misprint in our quarterly at v. 13. The first LORD should be in all caps, the second one not, just Lord. Why is that change significant? What would be the reason for adding, "the Lord of all the earth" at this point in the text?

Verse 12 of this reading indicates that one man from each tribe was to be selected, but nothing is said about the purpose for their selection. That doesn't come until just before the next reading in chapter 4. Also, in chapter 4, we read that the men who had come from the tribes who had already settled east of the Jordan went first, fully armed for battle, just in case.

III. The memorial stones. Joshua 4:19-24

As we look at this passage of these opening chapters, we are heavily into ritual narrative. Much of this entire episode is ritualistic in nature: the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant; it staying in the middle of the river until everyone has crossed; the crossing given with some degree of order, with the armed fighting men from the eastern tribes coming first; the collection of the stones; and now the arranging of the stones. Chapter 5 will continue with more ritual, including a mass circumcision for anyone who had not yet been circumcised during the last forty years in the wilderness, and a very important Passover celebration. All of this is ritual.

Interesting to this passage is the ritualized text of what is to be said in response to the question children will raise to their parents. It sounds like the Seder meal ceremony of the Passover week. Both the Jordan river and the Red Sea are involved in the answer, and in both cases the pronouns are personal, either 2nd or 1st, that is you or us, not your ancestors or them. The answer is always given in the voice of a participant.

The other thing that is interesting here is that the language of this ritual seems to repeat the faith statement from the mouth of Rahab, the outsider. Thus, the memorial is not only for Israel as conqueror, but also for the other nations, so that they might have a witness of the powerful, and I would add, gracious hand of the LORD, the God of the entire world.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. How important are stone memorials? How do we choose what is worthy of a stone memorial?
2. What other signs are available to us besides stone memorials of God's grace and faithfulness?
3. (From the editors of our lesson:) What traditions or activities do you and your family have that open the door for younger generations to ask questions about God?

Conclusion:

In Romans 12:2 Paul makes reference to Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross by calling on each of us to present to him our bodies as living sacrifices. In 1 Peter 2:4-10, Peter works with an Old Testament passage referring to Jesus as the living stone that had been rejected by the people but chosen by God as a precious stone. Then in the light of today's lesson, Peter calls on us "living stones" who together don't just make some kind of mound, but who are built together into a spiritual sanctuary, a visible entity which the world can see and hopefully benefit from enough to recognize the power and grace of God and be drawn to Him. Perhaps, we can be the kind of stones that can be sculpted and shaped by life's experiences and God's working in our lives rather than stones that would simply break into pieces under pressure.