



▶ *Remembering God's Works* ◀

GOD INSTRUCTED THE PEOPLE TO SET UP A MEMORIAL
AS A REMINDER OF HIS POWER.

JOSHUA 3:14-4:9

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.

 **What are some prominent memorials you can think of? Why are they significant, and what impact do they have on people today?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

JOSHUA 3:1–5:15

Chapters 3–5 accentuate three essential things the Israelites needed to remember as they entered the land of Canaan: God’s presence, God’s power, and God’s promises. Joshua instructed the people to break camp and follow the ark of the covenant as it was carried by the levitical priests. The ark represented God’s presence with Israel. It would be the Lord who would lead His people into the promised land. We should also note that it is called the ark of the *covenant*. One of God’s covenant promises to Abraham’s descendants was the land of Canaan (Josh. 3:1-5).

When it was time to cross the Jordan, the Lord instructed the priests carrying the ark to step into the waters. Normally, this would have been a precarious situation. At that time of year, the Jordan’s banks were overflowing. Nevertheless, when the priests stepped into the water, the waters receded, making a dry path for all of Israel to cross (3:6-17; 4:23).

When every Israelite had completed crossing the Jordan, the Lord commanded Joshua to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, to each take a stone from the riverbed. They were to carry it to their new camp west of the Jordan at Gilgal to set up as a memorial so that future generations would know this miraculous thing God had done. When the priests stepped out of the Jordan’s riverbed, the river resumed its course, flowing over the banks, flooding the area just as it was before (4:1-24).

Before the Israelites proceeded, three significant things happened. First, the men were circumcised. Apparently, their parents in the wilderness disobeyed God in this matter. God required circumcision as a sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). Second, they celebrated Passover, the commemoration of their redemption from slavery in Egypt. Finally, the Lord appeared to Joshua, again revealing His presence with him and the people (5:1-15).

 **Compare the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3:14-17 to the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14:15-31. What are the similarities?**

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

DRY GROUND (JOSH. 3:14-17)

¹⁴ **When the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carried the ark of the covenant ahead of the people.** ¹⁵ **Now the Jordan overflows its banks throughout the harvest season.**

But as soon as the priests carrying the ark reached the Jordan, their feet touched the water at its edge ¹⁶ and the water flowing downstream stood still, rising up in a mass that extended as far as Adam, a city next to Zarethan. The water flowing downstream into the Sea of the Arabah—the Dead Sea—was completely cut off, and the people crossed opposite Jericho.

¹⁷ **The priests carrying the ark of the LORD’s covenant stood firmly on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed on dry ground until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan.**

VERSE 14

Verses 1-13 emphasize three important details that prepare us for verse 14. First, these preceding verses emphasize the ark of the covenant. It is mentioned seventeen times in chapters 3–4. When God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, the Lord gave them His design for this sacred chest and commanded them to construct it to contain the Ten Commandments, the terms of the covenant God made with Israel. Later, Moses had Aaron place a jar of manna inside of it as a memorial of God’s faithful provision in the wilderness along with Aaron’s staff (Heb. 9:4). Importantly, the ark of the covenant also represented the presence of God. The lid of the ark was called the mercy seat, representing God’s throne. It rested in the holy of holies in the tabernacle. As verse 14 indicates, ***the priests*** were responsible for carrying it ***ahead of the people***.

Second, in verse 7 God told Joshua that He would exalt him before the people to demonstrate that, just as He was with Moses, He would be with Joshua when they crossed the Jordan. Exodus 14:31 indicates that it was when God parted the Red Sea and saved Israel from the Egyptians that the people believed Moses was truly God’s servant. Third, the crossing of the Jordan should be understood in light of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. In both instances, God separated the waters and heaped them up so that the Israelites could cross on dry ground. Both miracles were

displays of God's power on behalf of His people as He confirmed who His chosen leader was for Israel. As the priests carried the ark before the people, it was important for Israel to see God's demonstration of His power and glory again. Just as He led Israel out of captivity in Egypt by defeating their enemies, He was now victoriously leading them into the promised land. There the Lord would again defeat Israel's enemies and give His people their inheritance.

VERSES 15-16

This event happened in the spring when the Jordan River was in its flood stage. Typically, the Jordan was not difficult to cross. Throughout most of the year, the Jordan was anywhere from three to ten feet deep and ninety to a hundred feet wide. However, its being at flood stage means that the water was overflowing its banks, which also means that the depth and width of the river were significantly deeper and wider than normal. Jeremiah mentions that the Jordan had a dense thicket growing along its banks on both sides. This would have made the crossing even more difficult in its flooded state (Jer. 12:5; 49:19; 50:44). With these conditions, the river appeared to be impossible to cross. These circumstances highlight just how amazing this miracle was. When the priest's feet touched the water at its edge, the flowing water of the river stood still and then rose up just like the waters of the Red Sea. The city of **•Adam** was located about eighteen to nineteen miles north of the Dead Sea, meaning that nearly one third of the Jordan Valley was affected by what God did. The Lord delights in demonstrating His power in circumstances that are impossible for us. No one could take credit for what happened except the Lord.

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VERSE 17

The priests carrying the ark of the LORD's covenant are important to what transpired because the ark represented God's throne and presence with His people. As the priests ***stood firmly on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan*** with the ark of the covenant, it showed that Israel's mighty God was the One who miraculously did this. Every Israelite was able to cross the Jordan ***on dry ground*** just as their parents did when they crossed the Red Sea. The Lord

“completely cut off” (v. 16) the waters and patiently waited until every single Israelite got across to the other side. The Lord did not allow any one of His covenant people to be left behind.



Why are barriers an important part of our spiritual journey?

The Lord does wonderful things for His people in the present with an eye to their future.

MEMORIAL STONES (JOSH. 4:1-7)

¹ After the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD spoke to Joshua: ² “Choose twelve men from the people, one man for each tribe, ³ and command them: Take twelve stones from this place in the middle of the Jordan where the priests are standing, carry them with you, and set them down at the place where you spend the night.” ⁴ So Joshua summoned the twelve men he had selected from the Israelites, one man for each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, “Go across to the ark of the LORD your God in the middle of the Jordan. Each of you lift a stone onto his shoulder, one for each of the Israelite tribes, ⁶ so that this will be a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ ⁷ you should tell them, ‘The water of the Jordan was cut off in front of the ark of the LORD’s covenant. When it crossed the Jordan, the Jordan’s water was cut off.’ Therefore these stones will always be a memorial for the Israelites.”

VERSE 1

Verse 1 is connected to everything that transpired in the previous chapter. This is purposely demonstrated by the writer’s repetition of the phrase ***the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan*** (3:17; 4:1). Old Testament writers repeated words and statements for the purpose of emphasis. Verse 17 in chapter 3 speaks of what was happening while all Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground, and verse 1 of chapter 4 addresses what happened after all the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground.

Everything that follows in chapter 4 must be understood in light of this miraculous thing God did for His people. Israel needed to remember this demonstration of His awesome power and faithfulness as they entered the land of Canaan and faced its challenges. This sets the tone for what is to follow. The Lord does wonderful things for His people in the present with an eye to their future.

VERSES 2-3

Verse 2 is also repetitive as it reiterates the instruction Joshua gave to the Israelites to choose a man from each tribe, as the Lord commanded in 3:12. This demonstrates that in all that was happening Joshua was careful to do what the Lord commanded him. Joshua was becoming the leader God called him to be in chapter 1. Obedience to God's Word is essential to being a servant of the Lord and a leader of His people. In verse 3, Joshua explained what God wanted the twelve men to do. Joshua commanded each of them to return to the riverbed of the Jordan, to take a stone from the place where the priests were standing in the middle of it, and carry their stones to the place where they would camp that evening.



KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.
(See Exodus 20:1-3; 1 Timothy 1:17.)

VERSES 4-7

What happens in verse 4 may seem rather unremarkable, but it continues to highlight the obedience of Joshua and all twelve tribes of Israel. The obedience of this generation of Israelites stands in stark contrast to their parents. Their parents saw the mighty acts of the Lord as He brought Egypt to its knees with the ten plagues. They experienced His wondrous salvation as He led Israel across the Red Sea on dry ground. They witnessed God's manifest presence at Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, they feared the Canaanites more than they feared the Lord. They were unwilling to trust and obey God, refusing to enter into the promised land. They had forgotten how powerful and faithful to His people the Lord is. It is a wonderful thing when the people of God trust and obey Him in light of who He is and what He has done.

Joshua instructed the twelve men representing each of the tribes of Israel to **go across to the ark of the LORD your God**. This highlights what Joshua 3–4 describes—Israel’s crossing the Jordan on dry land and entering into the place of God’s inheritance, the land of Canaan.

The writer’s description of what transpired here should remind believers that when Jesus saved us, He brought us out of the bondage of our sin and our wandering in the wilderness of disobedience and into our inheritance, which is in Him.

When the men reached the middle of the Jordan where the priests stood with the ark, each of them was instructed to **lift** what apparently was a sizable stone **onto his shoulder**. Each man’s stone would represent the tribe to which he belonged.

The stones would be a memorial of what God had done that day, cutting off the waters of the Jordan in front of the Lord’s ark and allowing the people to cross the river on dry ground into the promised land. Certainly, this memorial was to serve as a reminder to the people who crossed the Jordan that day, but it also was to be a witness to generations to come. When their children would ask them what the meaning of the stacked stones was, the parents could tell them what God had done. This should remind believers that, when God does a wonderful work in our lives, it is important for us to remember what God has done. Not only that, but it is essential we tell others what He has done, especially future generations.



What are some milestones that could remind people of God’s work in their lives?

LASTING REMINDERS (JOSH. 4:8-9)

⁸ The Israelites did just as Joshua had commanded them. The twelve men took stones from the middle of the Jordan, one for each of the Israelite tribes, just as the LORD had told Joshua. They carried them to the camp and set them down there.

⁹ Joshua also set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing. The stones are still there today.

VERSES 8-9

The Israelites' obedience to Joshua demonstrates how God kept His promise of exalting Joshua in the sight of all Israel so that they would know God was with Joshua (3:7). Their obedience also demonstrates that the people recognized Joshua's commands came from God. Though Joshua is never called a prophet, he would be God's servant and spokesman to Israel.

Verse 8 indicates the twelve men set the stones in *the camp*. Verse 9 indicates Joshua set twelve stones in *the middle of the Jordan* where the priests stood. Most commentators indicate that this was probably not a second memorial but a reference to the same twelve stones that were carried to the west side of the Jordan. Verse 19 indicates the camp was located in Gilgal, a place that would have great significance in the life of Israel going forward. Thus, generations to come would have the opportunity to learn the meaning of the twelve stones. The writer of the book of Joshua indicates they still stood as a memorial at the time the book was written.



How can previous experiences with God strengthen a person's faith? How can we pass on our faith stories to future generations?



BIBLE SKILL: *Reflect personally on how a biblical passage applies to your own life.*

Joshua and the Israelites erected a memorial of twelve stones to help them remember and testify to what the Lord had done for them in the past. What specific memorials help you recall spiritual mountaintops in your experience with the Lord? What do you want to remember from those events? What tangible object can you use to help you remember God's work in your life at that time?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can be sure that God never fails to provide perfectly for His people during their time of need.
- + We should establish memorials in our lives that consistently remind us of God's work on our behalf.
- + God expects believers to remember and testify to what He has done for them.



Discuss how God has been at work in your Bible study group. What significant things has God done over the years in your church? How could you as a group share these things with others?



Think about significant, specific spiritual milestones in your life when God has demonstrated His power and faithfulness to you. How could you make memorials of these events in your life to help you remember what God has done and give you opportunities to testify to others of God's faithfulness and goodness?



Memorize Psalm 77:11-12.

Prayer Needs
