

“WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?”**JOSHUA 3 & 4**

I've been to Washington DC on several occasions and have seen many of our nation's famous monuments and memorials. There's one that has a compelling attraction for me personally – the Vietnam War Memorial located on the Mall. It has two walls which descend gradually into the ground in the shape of a giant V. On those smooth, black, granite walls are engraved the names of every American killed in that war – all 58,000+ - in the chronological order that they were killed. Perhaps you recall what a controversy the plans for that memorial aroused when it was first proposed. Some veterans loved the design; others thought it was terrible. But since its dedication in November 1982 – over 30 years now – the Vietnam War Memorial has become one of the most visited sites in all of Washington. No one doubts anymore that it's a powerful reminder of our country's most difficult war – a war that alienated generations from each other; a war that changed our nation; a war that left many broken lives and families. From every corner of our country, Vietnam veterans come to see the memorial built in their honor. It's a very emotional experience for many of them. Often they come dressed in their old military fatigues or uniforms. Flowers or poems are pressed into the seams between the walls. Tears flow. Names of fallen soldiers are rubbed onto pieces of paper to take home. It's a place to come and ask the question, “What do these walls mean? What did the Vietnam War mean for our country or for me as an individual?”

A memorial can be a powerful place. God understands that. The Bible is full of memorials. Time and time again – particularly in the Old Testament – God tells people in different times and places, “Mark this spot. This is a special, significant place. Or, here's something I want you to observe over and over again.” Christians have memorials, too. Probably the best known one is something we do in our church once a month. Some churches do it every week; others do it every day. It's the Lord's Supper. Whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross and at the empty tomb. It's a memorial. I'm not surprised, then, that we find the making of a memorial in the book of Joshua following one of the greatest miracles recorded in the Bible. Let's read what happened in Joshua 3:9-17.

God had parted another body of water – the Red Sea - 40 years earlier when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt. Now He parted the waters of the Jordan River so that the Israelites could march into the promised land of Canaan. What happened next? Let's read Joshua 4:1-7. So God instructed the Israelites to build a memorial – nothing elaborate, nothing ostentatious, just poignant and significant. Twelve stones were taken from the riverbed – one for each of the twelve tribal groups of Israel – and then these stones were piled up to make a simple memorial. Why? The answer is provided in Joshua 4:19-24. This simple memorial, then, would mark the spot where God performed an incredible miracle on behalf of His people. The memorial would reinforce the memory of what happened. No one could dismiss it in a few years as a fable or a myth. It was real. It happened. Here's the spot.

“Get What You've Been Given.” That's the title I've given to a series of message on the Old Testament book of Joshua this summer. These great stories of how the people of

Israel invaded the land of Canaan have spiritual lessons and principles for you and me. They can help us understand God better and how to live with God. God gave His people a land, but they had to take that land. They had to march into it, defeat the people who already lived there, move into the cities, and farm the land. The Promised Land – Canaan – was both God’s gift to His people and His plan for them. They had to possess their possessions. It’s one thing to be given something; quite another to take it. Just like them, we’ve been given the opportunity to experience a different quality of life because of Jesus. It’s been called the abundant life, the Spirit-filled life, the fully devoted follower of Jesus life, the committed life. But we have to take that life, possess that life or live into that life. When I consider this story of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and the erecting of this twelve stone memorial, I see a couple of transferrable spiritual principles. Here’s the first one:

PRINCIPLE #1: DON’T SETTLE FOR SECOND BEST.

Forty years before this great miracle of crossing the Jordan River, God had performed a similar miracle when the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea. The nation of Israel were slaves in the land of Egypt. God rained down plague after plague on the Egyptian people until the Pharaoh finally relented and told all the Israelites to get out of his country. But after he kicked them out, he had second thoughts. Pharaoh sent his powerful army to force the Israelites to return to Egypt and their slavery. But God delivered them miraculously. He caused the Red Sea to part in two, the Israelites passed through it on dry ground and then the waters came back and obliterated the pursuing Egyptian army. The Israelites did nothing to secure their deliverance. God did everything. They just received His salvation by doing exactly what He said to do.

Getting out of Egypt was a big step, but so also was entering Canaan – the Promised Land. The Israelites sent twelve spies into Canaan and charged them to bring back a report. Ten spies saw a lot of big people and big, walled cities. Two of the spies saw the big people and the big cities, too, but they believed in an even bigger God. Sadly, the people bought into the majority report. In effect, they said to God, “We’re not invading Canaan! Sure, we saw what You did to the Egyptians, but we don’t believe You can do the same thing to the Canaanites. We’re staying put right here in the desert outside of Canaan!” God’s response? “Fine. If you don’t want to obey Me and if you don’t want to get what you’ve been given, I’ll just wait for all of you adults to die off. I’ll let you wander around in the desert for the next forty years until you get old and die. Then, I’ll give your kids – everyone who is right now aged 20 and younger – the land I promised to you.” That’s exactly what happened.

What an unbelievable tragedy! That first generation of Israelites could have seen the Jordan River parted miraculously just like they’d seen the Red Sea parted. They could have marched into Canaan and experienced God’s power in defeating every enemy. They could have enjoyed life in the beautiful, fertile land God had given them. But they got their eyes off of God’s bigness and focused instead on the bigness of the obstacles. Sure, they were free from slavery in Egypt, but they settled for living in the desert when God wanted to give them so much more. They settled for second best. Fast forward

forty years. A new generation of Israelites had just crossed into Canaan. What did these twelve stones pulled out of the riverbed mean, then? What was the message? Every Israelite could look at that simple monument and remember that their ancestors had settled for second best. They'd settled for sand and dust when they could have had milk and honey. You pay a high cost for lack of trust in God and failure to obey Him. What did those stones mean? People of God, don't settle for second best!

Are you beginning to see the spiritual parallels in this story? Just like God gave Canaan to His people, God gives every follower of Jesus today an inheritance. No, it's not a literal country or place like Canaan. It's a quality of relationship with God and a quality of life in God every moment that is full of purpose, full of meaning, and full of God's abundance. That's our Canaan! But at some point after our decision to follow Jesus, we go through Jordan River experiences where we actually enter into the life that God wants us to have. Like the Israelites, we get out of a spiritual desert and move into a place of spiritual abundance. We possess our possessions. We claim our inheritance. We live into the life offered to us. We get what we've been given.

Let's face it. There are different kinds of Christians. There's the follower of Jesus who put his trust in Jesus some time ago. He asked Jesus to forgive his sins. He's a nice person. He probably attends a local church. But, sadly, he consistently and constantly settles for second best in his relationship with God. Yes, he may have gotten out of Egypt, but he never really got into Canaan. He's never gotten what he was given spiritually. It's kind of like the ever evolving, changing equipment you can find in the local health club. The array of available machines – stationary bikes, recumbent bikes, treadmills, Stairmasters, Lifecycles – is astounding. All are designed to enhance fitness. You get on them and where do you go? Nowhere! In fact, they're designed to take you nowhere. The point is not to get somewhere, but instead to expend as much energy as possible for as long as possible while you're going nowhere! Every time you step off the treadmill or the stationary bike, you're in the very same place you began. Let's face it – some Christians are very busy getting nowhere spiritually!

At different times in our life with God, it's as if there are spiritual Jordan Rivers that roll between us and the life God wants us to have in Him. It could be anything that prevents you from living a life of spiritual abundance and victory in Jesus. Here's a few examples. A spiritual Jordan River might be a particular temptation or sin that you simply haven't been able to defeat: a terrible temper, a deep resentment towards someone who hurt you in your past, dabbling in pornography, indulgence in gossip, an irresponsible use of money, addiction to alcohol or drugs, or a dislike of people from a certain race or socio-economic background. A Jordan River might be any ungodly attitude you refuse to give up like pride, or apathy toward the things of God, or self-centeredness, or just an unwillingness to grow and change. You just aren't making any progress spiritually. You're stagnant and stuck. You're spiritually defeated. You've settled for second best. Yes, you're probably going to go to Heaven when you die, but you're not experiencing the life God wants you to have here and now. Does that describe you, my friend?

There is another kind of Christian. She put her trust in Jesus, too. She asked Jesus to forgive her sin, too. She's a nice person, too. She's active in her local church, too. But that only begins to describe the transformation she's experienced. Everything has changed for the better because she keeps crossing spiritual Jordan Rivers. Now, right here, it's very important we understand something. The Israelites faced plenty of enemies, obstacles and battles once they got into Canaan. Canaan isn't a picture of Heaven. When you decide to enter into the abundant life Jesus offers you, it doesn't mean a perfect life, an easy life, an obstacle-free life or any enemy-absent life! There will be lots of battles to fight and enemies to defeat. There will be days you will feel like giving up and giving in. So, what's different about this kind of Christian? She cultivates her own hunger and thirst for God. She reads, digests and applies the Bible to her life. She prays regularly and often. She's conscious of where particular sins have a foothold in her life and she's gradually getting victory over them. She loves lost people and wants God to use her to reach lost people in her circle of influence. She knows her spiritual gifts and she's passionate about God using her to advance His Kingdom. No, she's far from perfect, but, in her life, pride is losing the battle, passion for God is winning out over apathy to God, and Jesus rather than self stays at the center of her life. Does that describe you, my friend?

In 1972, NASA launched Pioneer 10 – an exploratory space probe. Its primary mission was to reach the planet of Jupiter, photograph it and its moons, and beam data back to Earth about Jupiter. Scientists were afraid the asteroid belt Pioneer 10 had to maneuver through would destroy the satellite before it ever reached Jupiter. But Pioneer 10 accomplished its mission and much, much more. Swinging past the giant planet in November 1973, Jupiter's immense gravity hurled the spacecraft at a higher rate of speed toward the edge of the solar system. At one billion miles from our sun, it passed Saturn. At two billion miles, it passed Uranus; Neptune at three billion; Pluto at four billion. In 1997 – twenty-five years after its launch – Pioneer 10 was more than six billion miles from the sun. It still continued to beam back radio signals to scientists until January 2003. By the way, those signals come from an 8-watt transmitter which puts out about as much power as a night light in your bedroom. Pioneer 10 wasn't qualified to do what it did. Engineers designed it for a useful life of just three years. But it just kept going and going. That's what happens when you cross the Jordan Rivers in your life, keep on serving the Lord with effort and humility, and discover the life He wants you to live. God can work through anyone – even people with just 8-watt abilities. God cannot work, however, through someone who quits or won't even try.

Are you willing to enter into and claim the kind of life and the kind of relationship with God that He wants you to experience? Have you settled for second best? Or, are you determined to get up and get what God has given? What did those stones mean? Don't settle for second best when it comes to God. If you do, you'll lose big time. I see a second spiritual principle in this story as well. If you're going to move from a spiritual desert to spiritual abundance, you'll need to ...

PRINCIPLE #2: GET YOUR FEET WET.

Try to imagine this scene with me. Dawn is breaking on the Israelite encampment east of the Jordan River. The air is thick with tension because everyone knows something tremendous is about to happen. Tents are taken down and belongings packed up. People scurry around taking care of last minute details. The people start to walk toward the banks of the Jordan River. When they arrive, they see that the river is at flood stage of all things. The current is swift and the water is deep. There's no bridge and no boats to ferry them across. Then they're told to set up camp right there by the side of the river. Three days pass by as if God wants to impress upon them how impossible it is to cross the Jordan without a divine intervention of some kind. Then they break camp again, pack up and get ready for whatever God is going to do. The priests who are assigned the responsibility to carry the Ark of the Covenant are instructed to take the lead. The Ark is a symbol of God's presence and power in the midst of His people. The priests carrying the Ark are told to go ahead of the people and when they get to Jordan to put their feet into it, stand there and wait for God to act.

Is there a parallel to your life and mine? What's the transferrable principle? Crossing the Jordan was impossible from a human perspective. And yet, God invited His people to step right into that impossible situation, wait and expect Him to act. They weren't called to run away or give up, but instead to show some kind of faith in God to do what only God could do. Likewise, you and I are going to face our share of impossible situations from a human perspective. Often, God will invite us to step right into those impossibilities, then wait and expect Him to act. Instead of running away from or giving up on what is uncomfortable and difficult, we're often invited to step into those things by faith and expect God to do the miraculous.

I'm challenged by the fact that until and unless the Israelites literally stepped out in faith, God waited to act. When they obeyed, God miraculously stopped the flow of the Jordan and the entire nation of Israel – probably several million people – crossed over into the land of Canaan. I seriously doubt God would have done the miracle if those priests hadn't gotten their feet wet. Many times we get so busy running away from or giving up on impossible situations, we never give God the opportunity to do anything miraculous! God wants to do something big and wonderful through us, but we can say, "Thanks, Lord, but I'm satisfied with what's safe, comfortable and secure." Faith means you get your feet wet sometimes, doesn't it? Faith acts. Faith accepts a challenge. Faith doesn't necessarily go out looking for an obstacle, but faith refuses to run away or give up just because an obstacle appears. Faith expects big things from a big God.

Let's understand something important in this whole matter of getting what God has given to us spiritually. Experiencing fullness of life in Jesus isn't about avoiding every obstacle and somehow living a stress-free or pressure-free life. There is no such life this side of Heaven! Instead, fullness of life is about receiving God's power to allow the hard thing you are facing today make you spiritually stronger, the pressure you're facing today make you more patient, and the stress you're dealing with today make you depend upon Him more deeply. Fullness of life in Jesus is knowing God is faithful and just hanging in there long enough with God so He can prove that to you. Many times we just give up on God too quickly or we start to pout because He doesn't answer our

prayers our way. God doesn't withhold any good thing from those who have a heart to please Him. He orders and directs the steps of a person who sincerely wants to do God's will. All things really do work together for God's glory and the good of those who love Him. Difficult circumstances, upsetting events, frightening situations can all be occasions to prove that God is sufficient and that He never fails those who trust in Him.

I wonder if you're standing on the bank of some raging, flooding, very deep Jordan River experience this very day. It could be anything that is threatening to rob you of God's peace and joy. Is it a financial issue? Is it a rough patch in your marriage and you're wondering if it will survive? Are you afraid you're going to lose your job in the near future? Is there a broken relationship with one of your children or another key person in your life? Is it a sin issue that always seems to get the best of you? Might there be a very serious health issue staring you in the face today either for yourself or someone close to you? Could it be that you're right up against a major life decision that could well alter the direction of your life from this point on? Here's how this story impacts me. Unless the Lord makes it plain to me to run away from it, I need – instead - to go ahead and, by faith, step right into that difficulty, that heartache, that seemingly impossible situation. I need to get my feet wet just like the priests carrying the Ark got their feet wet by stepping right into the Jordan River. Get your feet wet and then give God the opportunity to do His thing.

What did that memorial tower of twelve stones mean to Israel? What did those stones mean? Joshua provides the answer, “For the LORD your God dried up the river right before your eyes, and he kept it dry until you were all across, just as he did at the Red Sea when he dried it up until we had all crossed over. He did this so all the nations of the earth might know that the LORD's hand is powerful, and so you might fear the LORD your God forever.” (Josh 4:23-24 NLT) Get your feet wet! Step out in faith and believe God! When you do that, God will do the miraculous on your behalf. God wants to prove His power to you *in* the obstacles, challenges and enemies you face not *outside* of them. Follower of Jesus, let's be open to learn the same spiritual lessons God taught Joshua and the people of Israel there on the banks of the Jordan River. Don't settle for second best in your walk with God and be willing to get your feet wet!

Paella is a classic dish in Spanish cuisine - a simple combination of just a few ingredients: rice, seafood, and a handful of vegetables. Other than those ingredients, the dish is flavored with a single spice—saffron. Saffron itself is fascinating. It's been traded for thousands of years. Saffron is harvested from flowers. When a certain type of crocus flower is in bloom, the delicate inner structures of the flower (stigmas and styles) are carefully plucked by hand. The deep-maroon, threadlike parts are then dried. Because of the difficulty related to cultivating and harvesting saffron, it's by far the most expensive of all spices—more expensive, pound for pound, than gold. Fortunately, a little bit goes a long way. Just a small pinch of crushed saffron will season a dish of paella large enough to feed a dozen people. It infuses the dish with its telltale bright yellow color. It imparts a heady, earthy aroma and a flavor that leaves a deep impression on both your palate and your memory.

A relationship with God that is getting deeper and richer demands that you and I exercise faith in new, often stretching ways. It's integral to getting what you've been given spiritually. It means stepping into some Jordan Rivers along the way and experiencing God's miraculous power. Now, it's easy to conclude that your personal faith is very small, very weak and – therefore - very unusable by God. But do you remember what Jesus said about faith? He said faith the size of a mustard seed – a speck – could be powerfully used by God. Like a mustard seed, or perhaps a pinch of saffron, a little bit of faith goes a long way and leaves a lasting impression. So, again, don't settle for second best in your walk with God and be willing to get your feet wet!