



THE MEMORY

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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Joshua 4:1-24

Sixth Message

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Several of you have told me how significant these words from the book of Joshua, "be strong and bold, God is with you; He will not fail you or forsake you," have become to you. In fact, this verse could well be displayed on a banner in front of the podium. In the land, there are enemies, but God is with us; that is why we are encouraged to be strong and bold.

One thing that can help us do this is the memories we have of what God did in bringing us into the land and defeating enemies. Memories are a powerful force that connect us to the past and help shape our future. As the popular song says, memories "light the color of our minds."

Our emotions are closely connected to our memories. Some memories, of course, we hold very dear. Whenever we gather with family and friends, these are the things we speak of as we recall joy-filled times from the past. Other memories, unfortunately, are not so pleasant. While we try not to think about those, even unpleasant memories are important.

Even more important than the events of our lives in the past is the way we remember them. I have vivid memories of returning home from the hospital after I learned that my mother had cancer and did not have long to live. Every square inch of that home where I grew up carried a memory for me. As I walked through the house, my mind was flooded with hundreds of events and conversations past.

Memories are very powerful: Grade school field trips, our first home run, our third grade birthday party, our first romance, the times we got in trouble and were punished, the time when someone who was dear to us died. Just about everyone who was alive at the time can recall vividly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news of the assassination of President Kennedy, or when the first astronaut walked on the moon.

We build national memorials so that we can remember great people and historic events: Memorials to World Wars I and II, memorials to great presidents, memorials to courage and discovery, memorials to historic moments. Bruce Waltke says: "Memory plays an important role in any society. Without a memory a person loses identity, and without a history to sustain it a society and the world around it become virtually phantom. Any society that hopes to endure must become, as sociologists put it, 'a community of memory and hope.'"

In our text today from the book of Joshua we will find that memories are extremely important to our spiritual history and our sense of community. Last week, we looked at Israel's historic crossing of the Jordan; today, in chapter 4, we will talk about memories of that great day. Joshua 4:1-24:

Now it came about when all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan, that the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight.'" So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the sons of Israel, one man from each tribe; and Joshua said to them, "Cross again to the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel. Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever."

And thus the sons of Israel did, as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, just as the LORD spoke to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel; and they carried them over with them to the lodging place, and put them down there. Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day. For the priests who carried the ark were standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything was completed 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; and it came about when all the people had finished crossing, that the ark of the LORD and the priests crossed before the people. And the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle array before the sons of Israel, just as Moses had spoken to them; about 40,000, equipped for war, crossed for battle before the Lord to the desert plains of Jericho. On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life.

Now the LORD said to Joshua, "Command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that they come up from the Jordan." So Joshua commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan." And it came about when the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD had come up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up to

the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before.

Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month and camped at Gilgal on the eastern edge of Jericho. And those twelve stones which they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the sons of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?' then you shall inform your children, saying, 'Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the LORD your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever."
(NASB)

The first thing we see in this chapter is that life in Christ, both for the community of Israel and for believers in Christ, is to be experienced in community.

We have seen this truth already. Here once again the "all Israel" motif is dominant in this chapter as an entire nation experiences both the crossing and the memory together. For example: "all the nation had finished crossing" (1); twelve men are selected, one from each tribe (2); twelve men again are mentioned, one from each tribe (4); twelve stones are lifted up, according to the number of tribes of the sons of Israel (5); stones are lifted up, according to the number of tribes of the sons of Israel (8); the two and a half tribes that wanted to settle east of the Jordan cross in front of the sons of Israel (12); Joshua became great in the eyes of all of Israel (14).

Notice that the number twelve is repeated five times in the first eight verses. This draws attention to the fact that each tribe is represented; no one is left out. In the story of Joshua, the nation of Israel is seen as one people, one community. They enter the land together, they fight together, worship together, and experience salvation history together.

In the New Testament, there is one new man in Christ, one body of Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female. This indicates that Christians are part of something much bigger than themselves. Our salvation is experienced in community. What happens to one happens to all. Unless we have a real sense of community, our life in Christ is diminished, our joy and hope is cut short. In the land, there is great strength drawn from community. This is what people are longing for today. They long to connect, to be accepted and loved, to be given the chance to be themselves. That is how the church is to function. Our own church, especially, is to be such a place.

The second thing that is obvious in this chapter is that God guides and leads his people. He is present with us in everything we do. Once again we see the prominence of God's presence, symbolized by the central role of the ark of the covenant: "Cross again to the ark of Yahweh your God in the midst of the Jordan" (5); "Because the waters were cut off from before the ark of the covenant of the LORD" (7); Joshua established the twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, under the standing place of the feet of the priest carrying the ark of the covenant (9); the priests carrying the ark of the covenant were standing in the

midst of the Jordan until all the things were finished which Yahweh commanded (10); it was when all the people finished crossing over that the ark of Yahweh and the priest crossed over before the people; "command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that they come up from the Jordan" (16); it was when the priests carrying the ark of the covenant of Yahweh had come up from the midst of the Jordan that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place (18).

The ark of the covenant symbolized the presence of God among his people—God leading his people. Last week, we saw that God was out in front of the nation of Israel, showing them the way as they crossed the Jordan. Here in chapter 4, we see that God remained in the midst of the danger while the people hurried across the river bed. God took the place of greatest uncertainty. He controlled the forces that could consume his people until all had crossed safely.

God leads us, guides us, and does wonders among us. But he also makes the greatest sacrifices: He stands in the gap. And that same God who stood in the gap in the midst of the Jordan is the same God who stood in the gap at Calvary. There he took on all of our sin upon himself so that we might pass safely into the promised land, into the heavenly city, into our new life in Christ. We cross over from the wilderness to salvation, and we are baptized into Christ, his death and resurrection. God does the mighty act, and we benefit from events that are supernatural and contrary to nature.

Now this same God who stood in the gap in the Jordan and at Calvary stands in the gap today among us. Every time we face a crossing, every time we are asked to enter a new land, every time we take on something that we fear or a controlling sin, he is with us to lead us and guide us. He takes the place of greatest danger until we have passed through to the other side. That is the God we worship.

There is a third thing that is evident in this chapter: God fulfills his promise to exalt his servant.

In chapter 3, God promised to exalt Joshua, as he had exalted Moses, and verse 14 shows that God kept his word: "On that day Yahweh caused Joshua to be great in the eyes of all of Israel; and they feared him just as they feared Moses all the days of his life." Moses took the people out of bondage and through the Red Sea. Joshua took them through the Jordan and into the promised land. Notice that it was not Joshua who stood in the midst of the Jordan. He was not in the place of God. He was simply the obedient servant of God who was confident in the strength of God. He was willing to follow God and repeat his instructions to God's people. As a result, he became great and the people feared him.

This is highly significant. It indicates that Joshua is linked with Moses, and that after Joshua will come another Servant who will lead God's people into salvation. This Servant, whom the prophet Isaiah identifies as a Suffering Servant, will be highly honored and exalted. So Joshua is a savior, a type of Christ. Ultimately, the stage is being set for the Son of God who will be exalted and glorified. God will be faithful to his Servant to do as he promised. And because we are in Christ, we too have the hope of being raised, of being exalted and sharing the glory of the Father and the Son.

Here is the the fourth thing that is clear from this chap-

ter: We are to build memorials that will cause us to remember the wonderful acts of God.

Notice what the text says: “And thus the sons of Israel did, as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, just as the Lord spoke to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel; and they carried them over with them to the lodging place, and put them down there. Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day” (4:8-9).

Joshua instructed twelve men, one from each tribe, to take twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan and, using these stones, he built a memorial to the Lord at Gilgal. Then he placed twelve other stones in the middle of the Jordan to mark the place where the priests stood with the ark of the covenant. These stones were still there when this text was written.

Two words, “sign” and “remembrance,” signify the memorial. “Sign” has a wide range of meanings. Basically, the word signifies or points to an unusual event. Most of the eighty occurrences of the word refer to miraculous signs, such as the plagues in Egypt. The rainbow is a sign of the covenant God made with Noah. Circumcision is the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. The Sabbath is the sign of God resting from his work.

The word “remembrance” refers to a memorial, a reminder, a record, token, object or act which brings something else to mind or which represents something else. In Hebrew, the notion of remembering is more than a calling to mind; it involves remembering with concern. It engages our emotions; it implies loving reflection and, where called for, a corresponding degree of action.

From verse 24 we see that the miracle at the Jordan would serve two purposes. First, that all the peoples of the earth would know that the hand of Yahweh is strong; and second, that all the people of God might fear the Lord their God all their days. That memory would serve as a reminder and as a teaching opportunity to the next generation. This is explained twice in the text (verses 6-7, 21-22). Parents would take their children camping, and when they came to the memorial, the young people would ask, “What are these stones?” That was when their parents would tell them about the faithfulness and loyal love of God and how he had acted in miraculous ways to bring them into the land.

The same principle is highlighted in Deut. 6:20-25:

“When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD our God commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt; and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. Moreover, the LORD showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; and He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers.’ So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today. And it will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all

this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us.”

One way we can apply this text to our own lives today is to build memorials when God does a wonder, things that will remind us of his faithfulness. Memorials connect our emotions to a God who saves, leads, and exalts. They serve as motivation for us to fear him. And they become teaching opportunities for the next generation. When our children ask about the significance of a picture, a poem or a painting, we can tell them the background so that they too might fear the Lord.

Yesterday, I participated in a wedding ceremony which I will remember for a long time. It began with a slide show of the lives of the couple, dating back to when they were infants. Before the bride was given away, the family pastor related a story about the birth of the bride. Then her father spoke and shared how much his daughter had meant to him over the years. After the father spoke, the couple shared some touching words with their parents. By the time my turn came to speak, all I had to do was pronounce the couple husband and wife. The power of the service came from memories. The memories shared of God’s faithfulness was the driving force. Everyone there could clearly see that God is the mighty one to be feared.

How important it is for us to have memories of our salvation and of how God has worked in our lives. It is crucial that we connect our memories and our emotions to our relationship with God. And it is important for the church as a whole to have spiritual memories. They are a necessary ingredient that helps motivate and stimulate the spiritual community. Every time God does a wonder, we should build a memorial.

Memories are powerful forces in or marriage, too. Frequently, my wife and I recall special memories. Some are good, some are difficult, but all involve special times we have experienced together. When we sit around the table with our children we often recall family events, vacation times and special adventures we have shared. Our children never seem to tire of hearing us recall memories of them when they were young. That is why we were careful to set aside times for family vacations, so that we might have many memorial stones.

So let us fill our lives with memories, pictures, cards and monuments to what God has done. When you get married, build memorial stones with pictures, poems, adventures and special occasions. When you have children, establish family traditions and visit places that have significance for you. Fill your house with memorial stones.

This memorial to Israel’s crossing the Jordan is highly significant for another reason. The author is careful to point out that the crossing took place on 10 Nisan, the first month of the Jewish year. This date coincides with the day that the Passover lamb was selected and the subsequent crossing of the Red Sea. We find the references in the book of Exodus:

“Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, ‘On the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household.’” (Exod. 12:3)

The story continues, in Exodus 12:12:

“For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night,

and will strike down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments— I am the LORD. And the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance.” (Exod. 12:12-14)

Here the crossing of the Jordan and the Passover lamb are remembered at the same time. Both declare the salvation of God: God passing over our iniquity; God standing in the gap; God becoming the Servant who was exalted; God initiating a new life.

In the New Testament, Jesus instituted the new memorial of the bread and the cup, which coincided with the Passover, and therefore with the Jordan crossing. This is the memorial stone for the cross, when Jesus became the Passover Lamb.

Here is how the apostle Paul put it, in 1 Corinthians:

The Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, ‘This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

Henri Nouwen writes of this memorial: “The greatest mystery of the Christian faith is that God came to us in the body, suffered with us in the body, rose in the body, and gave us his body as food. No religion takes the body as seriously as the Christian religion...Through Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, the human body has become part of the life of God. By eating the body of Christ, our own fragile bodies are becoming intimately connected with the risen Christ and thus prepared to be lifted up with him into the divine life...It is in union with the body of Christ that I come to know the full significance of my own body. My body is much more than a mortal instrument of pleasure and pain. It is a home where God wants to manifest the fullness of the divine glory.”

The communion table is a very significant memorial, a remembrance for the church which connects us with Christ and with our salvation. Communion is a sign of the greatest wonder of all, his resurrection. As a community, we feed on this memory, which is designed to stir our emotions.

Not only is the table meaningful to us, but it is a teaching opportunity for the next generation, as our text indicates. In some circles, communion has been seen as a rite of passage for which one had to meet certain requirements before partaking, but we have to be careful not to hinder the remembrance, because this memorial teaches the next generation.

I recall taking communion as a child in a Methodist church. Whenever I did this, I always felt that I needed to get to know better this God whom we were worshipping. The act of coming forward and kneeling was a holy time which taught me to humble myself before God. Deep emotions are stirred within me through this memory.

I don’t think God is as concerned about age as he is about the remembrance itself. Communion is a holy time for the community. And sharing communion together is not to be confined merely to our times in church. I remember once sharing a wonderful communion service on Good Friday with a group of young people in our home. Another communion service I remember fondly was the occasion when we shared the table of the Lord together as a family on Christmas morning. To me, these are powerful memories of the wonder of Christ.

Now we come to the table of the Lord together. As we eat and drink in remembrance of him, let us reflect on the words of the psalmist:

**I shall remember the deeds of the LORD;
Surely I will remember Thy wonders of old.
I will meditate on all Thy work,
And muse on Thy deeds.
Thy way, O God, is holy;
What god is great like our God?
Thou art the God who workest wonders;
Thou hast made known Thy strength among the peoples.
Thou hast by Thy power redeemed Thy people,
The sons of Jacob and Joseph. Selah.
The waters saw Thee, O God;
The waters saw Thee, they were in anguish;
The deeps also trembled.
The clouds poured out water;
The skies gave forth a sound;
Thy arrows flashed here and there.
The sound of Thy thunder was in the whirlwind;
The lightnings lit up the world;
The earth trembled and shook.
Thy way was in the sea,
And Thy paths in the mighty waters,
And Thy footprints may not be known.
Thou didst lead Thy people like a flock,
By the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Psalm 77:11-20)**

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