

## **WHAT HAPPENED HERE?**

JOSHUA 4:1-24

*Dr. Trevor Brown*

*A sermon preached for First Baptist Church of Amarillo, TX*

*July 26, 2020*

### **STONEHENGE<sup>i</sup>**

Sitting 8 miles north of Salisbury, England, is one of the most famous and recognizable sites in the world. I'd tell you what it is, but I don't really know. In fact, nobody seems to know. The theories abound:

In the Middle Ages, rumor had that the wizard Merlin built it himself. That made as much sense as those who think it's a UFO landing site. English archaeologists in the 17th and 18th century decided it was a Druid temple, Celtic origins. In 1963, American astronomer Gerald Hawkins proposed that it was an ancient "computer" to predict lunar and solar eclipses. Some do see it as a kind of lunar calendar. In 1973, English archaeologist Colin Renfrew hypothesized that it was the center of a confederation of Bronze Age chiefdoms. In 1998, it was proposed that it was a monument to the ancestral dead. Its place as a burial ground seems to be the one thing people can agree on. In 2008, British archaeologists Tim Darvill and Geoffrey Wainwright suggested it was used as an ancient place of healing. In 2012, British researchers published a book arguing it was a monument to peace and unity.

It's remarkable, really. We don't even know when it was first called "stone-henge." Stones that are 13ft tall and 7 ft wide were stacked on one another like that before a wheel was around. Some of the smaller igneous rocks came from 150 miles away! I won't even start listing the theories on how it all got there.

More than 800,000 tourists go to visit it every year, even though nobody really knows what it means. They don't even let you climb on it OR spray paint it. Maybe that's part of the draw. *Visitors want to join centuries of onlookers and scientists and historians who have gawked at the miracle and asked: "What happened here?"*

It's the kind of question that Joshua chapter 4 imagines will be asked of a different pile of rocks.

### ***The Story of Joshua 3-4***

This book dives into God's story at a most interesting place. Joshua is appointed as Israel's new leader, a new Moses. Like Moses had before him, Joshua commands obedience to the covenant, obedience to the Torah and the laws of God. To understand Joshua 4, you have to understand all that the Israelites have been going through. They have been rescued under Moses from slavery in Egypt, but have been journeying in the wilderness for an entire generation. An entire generation who were delivered from Egypt have died off because they were afraid when they got there.

They're like a team coming fresh off an 0-12 season who just got a new coach. He's talking big, but we know that the roster hasn't changed that much.

But, now it's time for Joshua to lead them all into the Promised Land. God's people are on the move right away. It sits waiting for them just across the Jordan. Joshua sends spies into the land, which goes better than it did for Moses back in Numbers. The spies have reported that "the LORD has surely given all the land into our hands." (2:24)

And so just as the Lord had parted the Red Sea and led the Israelites out on dry ground. He was going to do for this generation, drying up the Jordan and making the way for them to cross. So they set out just as God had instructed. The priests take the ark of the covenant, the very presence of God, and march down to a flood-stage river. And by faith they step into the water, and the moment their toes are dipped into the waters the Jordan River is cut off from above, standing still and rising up in a single heap. And while the ark of the covenant rested with the priests standing on dry ground in the middle of a river, an entire nation crossed over leaving behind decades of meandering in the barren wilderness.

What had seemed improbable, perhaps impossible, for an entire generation has at last been accomplished! It must have felt surreal. To be the fulfillment of an ancient promise to Abraham must have been overwhelming. I imagine there were songs and shouts as God's people worshiped and praised Him. One thing is for sure: if God intervenes like that, you never stop making it known!

In today's passage, God tells Joshua to choose 12 men – one from each tribe – and to have them take stones from the middle of the Jordan, from the very place where priests watched the presence of God hold back the waters, and to pick them up on their shoulders and to carry them over to their camp and to set them up as a reminder for all who might ever ask: "What happened here?"

### ***Joshua 4:6-7***

*Contemporary artist Andy Goldsworthy has explored aspects of stones in his work. His installation "Garden of Stones" can be seen at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan, NY. It's a presentation of numerous large boulders. Each boulder has holes drilled in it and, in 2003, Holocaust survivors and families planted trees in them. Every viewer is able to see and visualize a story of improbable survival - of trees planted in rock.<sup>ii</sup>*

In Joshua 4, the people are given instructions as to a memorial they will construct as an aid to help them and their children remember the events of the day. Having just experienced the undeserved grace and provision of God himself, they were to make sure there never came a day when this story was forgotten.

### **1. We must tell the story**

Like these Israelites, we are a people who have experienced the miracle of God's salvation. In Jesus, God has delivered us from the chaos of the wilderness and into His divine rest. We, too, by no power of our own, have been given an inheritance that we could never earn or deserve. We have been brought out of slavery and into freedom, from darkness to light, from brokenness to wholeness, from death to life. If that's your story, how could you ever keep it quiet?

And we are called, as were they, to tell the story of salvation from generation to generation, from east to west, until the end of time. You have a story to tell!

The Hebrew Bible provides numerous accounts where stone structures are made in memory of significant events: Gen. 28:18-22 – God shows up at Bethel and it's marked; 31:45-47 – Jacob and Laban make a covenant and set up rocks to remember; Ex. 24:4 – Moses receives the law and they stack stones; 1 Sam 24 – victory over the Philistines is marked by more stones. During the Passover, the Lord said to Moses, "In days, to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' Say to him, 'With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'" (Ex. 13:14)

Before Moses died he said to the Israelites: "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?' tell him. 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.'" (Dt. 6:20-21)

One generation of Israelites was responsible to remember the events and to inform the next generation of all the miracles God had done for his people. Joshua perpetuates this tradition and instructs Israel to explain to future generations the miracle at the Jordan River. This text reminds us that Christians can't ever forget the mighty works of the Lord and the miracles God has performed on their behalf. They're responsible - *we* are responsible - to teach them from one generation to the next, until the end of time.

The miracle of the crossing is not to be celebrated only by the generation who experiences it. These stones were to be signs that would be asked about, teaching the next generation about the past so that they could face the future with hope. The idea is that stones were to be set up so that the kids of the future would literally trip over the miracle again and again.

### **I wonder: does anyone stumble into the story of God when they walk into your life?**

Joshua 4 is about setting up a marker that will tell anyone and everyone. Their kids would literally trip over it. *What are people tripping on when they learn about you? What is your identifying mark? Your overwhelming passion and purpose?*

The truth we're enlisted to tell isn't just whatever entertains or catches the eye or pleases the ear.

## 2. We must tell the story of God

Anytime there are people involved, you better believe we can find a way to make it about ourselves. I can already see it: Each tribe starts looking for the strongest person to grab their stone. "Who's going to carry our stone? Whose stone will be the biggest?" "Maybe we can get ours there first!" "Let's put ours on top." The story could so quickly become about whose stone is on top.

The ark of the covenant is mentioned 9 times in chapter 3. The whole story is orchestrated to point to God and to leave no mistake about who is bringing victory. The whole story of the Israelites is one big lesson in who God is! *What about your life? What's it organized around?*

The point is this: every moment of your life is surrounded in God's provision, from the highest of highs to lowest of lows. For every time you had the courage to put your feet all the way in the water; for every time when you saw a river dry up under your feet; for every time your life was sustained by God's almighty and ever-present hand; for every moment of your life, there is a story about a God who provides, saves, redeems, restores. *Is there evidence? **Would someone following behind you know what God has done here?*** Or would they just learn about the little kingdom you were interested in building? They just know the old you, the self-made you, the imaginary apart-from-God you.

We're conditioned, I think, to make ourselves the center of the story. But every stone, marker, story, and photo remind us of a future we didn't make for ourselves. They show us something that God made possible. Every day of your life is filled with the potential to bring others to know your God. Even the worst memories reveal a God who overcomes, redeems, or sustains us through it all.

"Right here, I crossed over an un-crossable line by no power of my own." "This was a place where I learned something new about God." "There was a day I was grateful to God for." "That was a time when I struggled, but God was with me even still."

Do you ever stop and think: surely there was a better way. An enslaved people manage to wiggle their way out from under Pharaoh's foot, and God has them crossing seas and wandering in the wilderness and waiting on manna from heaven and carrying around stones. Why not just airlift this crew from A to B? Why not smooth the road for them if not for the fact that if they didn't go through all this, they may never get it. They might never figure out who God is and what it means to trust Him in faith.

God is building for these people a testimony of faith that will teach them what it means to truly believe in God. They will convey to the whole world who their God is, what He desires for the world, and they will be a people who draw all the world into God's saving grace.

Have you ever considered that something in your life might be the same? That the best and, yes, the worst experiences in your life can bear witness to a God who can deliver? **Is it possible**

that someone could ask of your life “What Happened Here?” only to learn nothing about God?

### **Psalm 96**

<sup>1</sup> *O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.*

<sup>2</sup> *Sing to the Lord, bless His name; tell of His salvation from day to day.*

<sup>3</sup> *Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous works among all the peoples.*

<sup>4</sup> *For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised...*

Gilgal will be an important place for Israel. On this ground, Samuel will lead Israel in confirming Saul’s appointment as king. Twice in Saul’s time it’s a place of sacrifice. Hosea and Amos mention it as a place of sacrifice and pilgrimage. Micah 6 recalls it when telling the people to remember God’s acts. Apparently, they did a decent job of retelling the miracle of salvation!

The story of the Jordan River permeates the whole rest of the Bible. The last moment that the prophet Elijah is spoken of on earth is found in 2 Kings 2. And in that passage, where are Elijah and Elisha? Here, at Gilgal, beside the Jordan. Elijah strikes the water and parts it, and there Elijah ascends to heaven; Elisha is led back across the Jordan, imitating Joshua and the Israelites. Elijah’s prophetic spirit passes to Elisha as he passes back through the waters.

And make no mistake about it, these are exactly the events that the first reader of the gospel of Mark would have thought of when Mark chose to begin the story of Jesus not with the nativity or a genealogy, but with Jesus meeting John the Baptist - someone who looks a lot like Elijah. Jesus, like his namesake Joshua, will pass through the Jordan, and there He receives the Spirit of God.<sup>iii</sup>

It’s as though even Jesus is repeating that great episode— a new Yeshua – pointing all who might listen to the God who rescues. Turns out they did a pretty good job making this known! It would become a sign and symbol of crossing into heaven for centuries to come.

### **Roll, Jordan, Roll<sup>iv</sup>**

*In 1867, in the wake of the Civil War, William Francis Allen set out to compile for the first time the powerful, spiritual songs of slaves in the United States. Some songs were unique to a plantation, some lyrics differed here or there, but some he said, “stretch from South Carolina all the way to Florida.” And the first song in his book he called “the best known and noblest of all” - “Roll, Jordan, Roll.”<sup>v</sup>*

*In fact, the night of her escape from the Poplar Neck Plantation, Harriet Tubman bid farewell to her friends and family members by singing, “I’ll Meet you in the Morning.” In it, the singer of the song apologizes for leaving, but promises to meet the listener in the morning:*

*I’ll meet you in the morning,  
I’m bound for the promised land.  
On the other side of Jordan,  
Bound for the promised land.<sup>vi</sup>*

*That story of the Jordan was code not just for making it across the Ohio River to free states, but code for a God who holds out hope for weary souls and promises them a future better than the suffering they know now.*

Do you think the Israelites could have guessed that centuries later their river would be a story of salvation? Of deliverance? Of getting weary souls to freedom?

### ***Joshua 4:19-22***

But, why? Why did God do all of this? So the Israelites could have a safer place to live? Raise their kids in a more secure community? Better schools? So that they could all be more isolated or insulated? No, listen to verse 24.

***23 For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea,[b] which he dried up for us until we crossed over, 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”***

They were to be a people who were called out from among the others so that the world might know the true God!

### **3. We must tell the story of God together**

It's not about one tribe or the other. It's not about Israel versus other nations, but about God fulfilling His promise to the family of Abraham. The gathering of the twelve stones symbolizes the unity of the entire nation of Israel, one for every tribe.

God was doing something with them together that they could not do separately. Not only is your life designed to point beyond itself to God, to proclaim in every way the story of His salvation, but He has created His church to live as His people before the world. Each of us, having crossed through the waters, are drawn together by His Spirit and equipped to model for the world a new way of living.

Throughout history, God has looked for a group of people who would give themselves wholeheartedly to the idea of following Him. He has longed for a people who would push aside other preferences and priorities for the sake of knowing and loving Him. What God longed for in Israel, He longs for even today: a people whose core identity centers on His Son Jesus, “a people remarkably distinguishable from the rest of the world.”<sup>vii</sup>

### **1 Peter 2:4**

***As you come to Him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.***

You are living stones! And the monument being made by you models God's kingdom for the world! When the Pharisees wanted Jesus to keep his people quiet, he told them (Luke 19:40) "*I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!*"

If you won't say it, even the stones will. So join them. Pull out the markers. Preach it to yourself, to your children, and to your neighbor. "I am who I am by the grace of God." So let our story not be that God must seek out other stones. Join with all creation in proclaiming that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and we will serve him forever!

*Stonehenge is an impressive landmark, but for lack of evidence, we don't really know what to make of it. It was created by people with no written history. We're left to guess on our own. It has no real meaning. You can dig deeper within, but our meaning comes from above, from God.*

For all its mystery and marvel, no one looking at Stonehenge has ever been able to figure out who the maker is. **What about you?**

Look around. These are living stones. What do these stones mean to you? What will you say, what will they learn, when the world witnesses the miracle of your life and asks: "What happened here?"

---

<sup>i</sup> "Stonehenge," Encyclopedia Britannica (accessed 23 July 2020) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Stonehenge> ; "Stonehenge," history.com, Feb. 19, 2020 (accessed 23 July 2020), <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/stonehenge>; Stephanis Pappas, "Stonehenge a monument to unity new theory claims," CBSNews (June 22, 2012, accessed 23 July 2020). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/stonehenge-a-monument-to-unity-new-theory-claims/>

<sup>ii</sup> Lynn Miller, "There To This Day," *Art & Faith Matters* (October 26, 2014); <https://mjhnyc.org/exhibitions/garden-of-stones/>

<sup>iii</sup> Robert B. Coote, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 54-55.

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "River Jordan in Early African American Spirituals," (accessed 22 July 2020) <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/river-jordan-in-early-african-american-spirituals>

<sup>v</sup> Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison, William Francis Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States* (A Simpson & Co., 1867), 58.

<sup>vi</sup> Marques Hollie, "Do Down, Moshe: Decoding Negro Spirituals," *LABA*, March 30, 2019 (accessed July 22, 2020) <https://labajournal.com/2019/03/go-down-moshe/>

<sup>vii</sup> Brady Boyd, *Remarkable: Living a Faith Worth Talking About* (Howard Books, 2019)