

# Joshua – Moving Forward

## #3 Remember what has gone before Joshua Chapter 3 - 4

**Twitter** is littered at present with re-posts of ambitious predictions and bold statements made in 2020 by public figures **that have not aged well**. People seem to love to commemorate errors and misspoken words on this platform.

**Facebook**, on the other hand, likes to surprise you with unsolicited memories: **electronic anniversaries** commemorating happy times past: like when you bought your new puppy, celebrated a special birthday, when you graduated, or that day when you could travel further than 5km from your home 😊.

Looking back and **remembering** times past is common to us all, but it intrigues me how some **nations** today go to much greater lengths to commemorate **catastrophic** and **tragic moments** past more than positive milestones.

This week's 20-year anniversary of **9/11** is a case in point for Americans. "That day is **forever seared** into all of our memories", said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland at the memorial event on Friday.



For Australians, I guess the commemoration of **Anzac Day** is the most obvious parallel. That tragic failure in warfare at Gallipoli long ago far **outranks** any other commemoration we do collectively in public as a nation.



I have personally visited both the World Trade Centre site in Manhattan, and Gallipoli in Western Turkey. It's incredible **how palpable the reality of those events past** seems when you are on location. Memorials can spark in us **powerful memories** that shape our **beliefs** and **culture**. But is this the case only with remembrance of past catastrophes? Why not make more of commemorating **positive, life-changing** events regularly?

In chapters 3 and 4 of the Book of Joshua, the **act of remembrance** is central to the lesson about **faith in God** intended by the writer. See how the structure of the narrative in these chapters presents this emphasis:

- Crossing the Jordan River 3:14-17
  - **Building a memorial to this event** 4:1-10a
- Crossing into the Promised Land 4:10b-14

**REFLECT** - What **acts of commemoration** or remembrance are common in your household or family? Do you mark events past with any elaborate symbols or ceremonies? How do those times of remembering shape who you are?

## Learning Dependence on God

The Book of Joshua is considered by the ancients as among the books of the **“former prophets”**. You might read this book of the Old Testament as if you are reading a mere record of ancient history. But the narrative reads like a **theological commentary** on remembered events past. It offers faith-shaping, belief-building, character and culture creating words to God’s people – as it did **then, so now**.

In **verses 20 and 21** of chapter 4 Joshua says to the people who have crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land,

‘In the future when your descendants ask their parents, “What do these stones mean?” tell them, “Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.”

Joshua expects the **twelve stones** taken from the riverbed as per his instructions to have a long-lasting influence as recorded in **verses 5-7** of the same chapter...

‘...Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, “What do these stones mean?” tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel for ever.’

Adding to our insights into the theological and spiritual lesson of the text C.F. Keil notes **that the date mentioned** in Joshua 4:19 when the people camped at Gilgal after the river crossing is the **exact day 40** on from when Israel prepared for their **exodus** from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> We see too in chapter 5 that the first act of the Israelites after making camp was to celebrate Passover together.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Tenth day of the first month (Exodus 12:2-3). See Ralph Davis p. 10

<sup>2</sup> 5:10-12

connection between this event and the Red Sea event is unmissable.<sup>3</sup> Here too, as in those former days, **what looked impossible** for people **became a reality** because of God's greatness, grace, and faithfulness to the **promise**.

Consider how clear God made it to the original Israelites that entry into the land of Canaan was **not of their own doing**; that they were **wholly reliant** on God:

1. **Firstly**, their **numbers were decimated** due to their prior rebelliousness against God.<sup>4</sup> They were now a meagre collection of nomadic, desert dwelling tribes numbering around the population of Adelaide!
2. **Secondly**, their own spies reported back about the huge number of sophisticated, intimidating, unwelcoming current tenants in the land ready and waiting to wipe them out if they tried to settle there.
3. **Thirdly**, we see in chapter 3 that it's **Springtime**<sup>5</sup>; a time when the Jordan river is at its widest, fastest flowing, greatest depth and degree of difficulty for crossing, and
4. **Lastly**, the people passed by the priests standing in the middle of the dry riverbed carrying the **symbol of God's presence** from days of old.

This event was **impossible without the intervention of and presence of God!**

Exactly **how** God forded the river upstream is not clear.<sup>6</sup> Modern history has seen at least 3 earthquakes that "naturally" stopped the Jordan from flowing near this location. But the instant return of the raging waters recorded in Joshua 4:18 suggests this is to be understood as a miracle of God's making **for faith-building**.



While at other times of year Israel could have **waded through** half a metre deep water mixed with marsh and jungle intermingling with the river's gentle flow at this point of the river, on **this day** only God could have made it possible to cross.

Israel was still learning that they were **God's people**. They were yet to understand fully that they represented **God's goodness** before the watching world. The miraculous crossing added to their learning because it showed that:

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<sup>3</sup> 4:23

<sup>4</sup> Moses has died and in the Book of Numbers we read of their radical reduction in population due to sin

<sup>5</sup> 3:15. Normally, this area of the Jordan could be waded through, with some difficulty across marsh and jungle entanglements at about 0.5m deep. But at this time of year it could be 3 times the width across and up to 2.0m deep in parts with much debris from up-river.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua 3:16 and 4:18

- **God was with Joshua**, as God was with Moses (3:7, 4:14)
- **what God promised would soon to come to pass** [if God could get them into Canaan, God could surely settle them there] (3:10-13), and
- **Israel's exploits displayed God's uniqueness** and goodness to all nations so that others too might believe and follow [as Rahab did<sup>7</sup>] (4:24)

## The Power of Remembrance

There's a new feature film starring Hugh Jackman and Rebecca Ferguson called "Reminiscence". The tagline for this new movie is "**There's nothing more addictive than the past.**" I know I've become quite nostalgic during lockdown – pining for pre-covid times. We often use this word "reminiscence" in this nostalgic sense.



But the memorial of twelve stones in Joshua chapter 4 was **not about nostalgia**. This is not like Abba returning to the recording studio 40 years on to make us happier during the pandemic! Rather, there is an active, faith-building component to this remembrance that is all about the future. See in verse 21 how Joshua asks the people to **imagine a day to come** when a young child asks what this **memorial** means. Joshua says...

'...tell them... "The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always [worship] the Lord your God.'" (Josh. 4:22-24)

The erection of the twelve stones on the west bank is a God-inspired memorial that calls to mind the essential act of God at the heart of Israel's identity, beliefs, character, and destiny.



Christians like me, born of Western culture, would do well to learn the power of remembering from our **Aboriginal brothers and sisters**. I recall talking with two young men on the dry bed of the Finke River some years back. I was intrigued by the way they introduced themselves to me –through stories of their ancestors past that I came to know who they were and what they valued in life. They could even point to local landmarks to describe their ancestors and the importance of their memories to their identity today.

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<sup>7</sup> Joshua 2:10-11

Remembering and commemorating is a fascinating area of study:

- There's the **pure science of memory**, from Ebbinghaus and Pavlov through to Tulving and Nadar.
- There's the **philosophy of remembering** from Plato to Reid, to Hume and Locke.
- And there's also **the theology of remembrance** down the ages, including writings of the great European and English church reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century through to continuing varied scholarship today.

**Remembering** God's goodness is **crucial to building a strong faith** in Christians today. Dale Davis says:

"The greatest enemy of faith may be forgetfulness."

Exodus chapter 16 noted that this was a major and repeated problem with ancient Israel. "They **never came to assume**," says Davis, "that God was sovereign, powerful, loving, and faithful."

**REFLECT - What about you?** What are your **assumptions** today about God? What memories shape those assumptions?

## Bringing the lesson closer to home

The twelve stone **memorial at Gilgal** was intended to strengthen the **faith** of future Israelites. It said effectively said to them: "If your people could get into the land, God can settle you in that land."

The **Apostle Paul** used this same **method of teaching** for Christians in the New Testament Letter to the Romans. In chapter 8 he wrote:

<sup>32</sup> [God]... did not spare his own Son, but gave [Jesus] up for us all – how will [God] not **also**, along with [Jesus], graciously **give us** all things?

**Remembrance** that builds faith is a major part of Christian discipleship. We can apply the lessons of Joshua 3 and 4 to our own journey of faith as Christians in at least these three ways:

1. **The Bible** - In many ways, **the Scriptures** themselves function like the twelve stones at Gilgal calling to mind for us all that God has done and is doing.
2. **The Spirit** - Jesus even spoke of **the Holy Spirit** as the one who would "bring to mind all that Jesus had taught"; God actively working remembrance in us.

3. **The Lord's Supper** - Jesus used the Greek word *anamnesis* (which we translate as "remembrance") when he passed the bread and the cup to his friends at the last supper.<sup>8</sup> That Greek word goes all the way back to Plato, but its significance coming from the lips of Jesus is that in commemorating his death for sin upon the cross. In a celebration of The Lord's Supper we believe that we **participate** spiritually in all that God promised; we receive the benefits of Jesus' sacrificial death by faith. Any such gathering is a **faith-building memorial** that is active and powerful. If God forgave Jesus' executioners, God will forgive us our sins. If God raised Jesus to life, God will raise us up too.

Crosby Stills Nash and Young once famously exhorted the world in song, "Teach your children well". But they were just echoing a principle of life taught long, long before by Moses to all of Israel. In Deuteronomy 6 Moses calls upon Israel to teach children daily about God's goodness in the past. In Deuteronomy chapter 8 he calls all adults to remember regularly when they settle in the promised land just how they came into such prosperity and freedom and who it was that made it possible.

Regular acts of **remembrance** in our daily discipleship should include routines of reflecting on the Scriptures, scheduled encounters with the Holy Spirit in times of prayer, and regular gatherings with God's people (virtual or in-person) and especially in the Lord's Supper. There may also be anniversaries of good things God has blessed your church or household with over time – anniversaries of answers to prayer, remembrance of leaders and servants now departed who once inspired by their example, or the marking of great challenges to faith or witness overcome.

Such acts of **spiritual remembrance** shape who you are, what you stand for, and inspire you as to what your destiny is in Christ – all because of the love and grace of God.

**How will you integrate faith-building memorials into your daily discipleship?**

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<sup>8</sup> See Luke 22