

# Memorials: Benefiting from the Past; Not Chained to the Past

## Joshua 4:1-9

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, September 11th 2022

John Huffman points out that this chapter is a marvelous corrective to two extremes that tend to exist in every generation. He labels the first extreme the ultra-conservatives who long for the good old days and who tend to *camp* around the memorials rather than *learning* from the memorials - theirs a big difference. Their main goal is to conserve the values of the past, so they tend to criticize whoever is pushing too hard for improvement. And God's counsel to this first extreme is found in Ecclesiastes 7:10. God tells them, "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions." (NIV).

Huffman labels the other extreme the ultra-radicals. These people are impatient with the past and they have a hard time finding contentment in the present. They are so caught up in their picture of what the ideal should look like, that in trying to achieve that ideal they end up alienating people and destroying social structures. Ironically, even though the ultra-radicals despise the ultra conservatives, their only contribution is similar to that of the ultra conservatives - they criticize everything people are trying to do to solve problems today. No effort is good enough. I've been dialoguing with some of these people on Facebook. Just as one example - they are so understandably frustrated with the church that they refuse to be a part of any ecclesiastical structures (and as one of my friends said last week on Facebook - and he will probably read this), "My preferred definition of a church is three homeschooling families in the living room." Disillusioned with the visible church, these people are usually only visible on social networks. The trouble is, at least some of them keep busting up their ideal networks with their critical attitudes.

The interesting thing about it is that both of these groups have a lot to contribute to the kingdom. They do. They are usually very gifted people. I value them. But I think they would be more effective if they could learn some of the principles that we will be going through over the next two weeks in this chapter. Huffman says about these two extremes,

The problem with the ultraconservative and the ultraradical is that both are escaping from the present into a fantasy world. [I think that is a very accurate insight. *They* don't think of their theories as a fantasy world. They think of them as truth. But he says, "both are escaping from the present into a fantasy world." And then he explains what he means by that.] The present isn't perfect, but neither was the past nor will the future be on this earth. I'm convinced that both the ultraconservative and the ultraradical are hungrily searching for meaning—a meaning that tends to elude them...

This fourth chapter of Joshua, however, grapples with the fact that a basic component of life is a hope for the future that is based on the memories of the past—which help bring meaning to the present. Memories are important! They are the soil of our present experiences into which our roots sink deeply and from

which we receive nourishment... We are instructed by our memories as to the most creative way to live in the present, and they help equip us with a positive hope for the future.<sup>1</sup>

I wish he had said more on this chapter, but I thought it was a very helpful way to at least introduce some of the ideas that the whole chapter is wrestling with. Now, we are only going to deal with verses 1-9 today, and I've come up with ten introductory lessons from these verses.

## I. Each of you has a finished work of God that needs to be remembered (v. 1)

In verse 1 it says,

And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying...

In verse 1 God had spoken to them, provided a leader for them, and had taken all of them through an impossible situation. When times would get tough in the future, they could come back to this home base of operations in Gilgal and allow these stones to remind them of the mighty work of God in a way that would encourage them to trust God for more. But they wouldn't stay in Gilgal. They would not camp out forever around these memorials. These would be the stimulus for conquering the land by God's grace.

But let me draw out a couple of other things from that verse. It says, "when all the people had completely crossed over". For memorials to work, they need to represent a finished work. If it was God's intention to reproduce the same miracle (crossing the Jordan) whenever Israel wanted a miracle, there would be no point in having a memorial. And so memorials confront Americanism head on. Sadly, many Americans aren't interested unless it happens to them right now. They aren't interested in what God has done in an ancestor's life unless it can be exactly reproduced in their lives. But God wants us to remember and honor His mighty deeds from the past - even if such past events cannot ever again be reproduced. Think about it: you can't reproduce your own conversion. It was a one-time event, and yet it is a glorious event that we are so thankful for. But the same is true of most memorialized events. They can't be repeated, yet they still are valuable.

The second thing I want to point out from verse 1 is that (like Israel) if you are a believer, I can guarantee you that God has already completed some work in your life that is worth gratefully remembering. If you are a new believer then you can at least remember the blessing of your conversion. Turn it into a testimony. Share it. Memorialize it. And if you don't know how to do that, the first Great Commission course led by Michael Elliott earlier this year showed you some easy ways to do that.

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<sup>1</sup> Jr. Huffman John A. and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, Joshua, vol. 6, The Preacher's Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1986), 74-76.

But if you grew up never knowing a time when you didn't trust the Lord for your salvation, you can gratefully remember God's covenant faithfulness from generation to generation. *That's* a fantastic testimony. In my case, I am grateful for non-stop generations of Christians going back to at least the 13th century on my mother's side, and possibly as far back as AD 1066.

But third, this was not the first miracle that needed to be remembered by the Israelites. Later he will memorialize earlier battles with the Amalekites, God's provision of the manna, the Passover, and the Red Sea crossing. And in the same way, you should try to remember some of the hundreds of cool things that God has done for you since you became a Christian. Sadly, if you are like the average Christian today, you have forgotten most of them. That's why memorials are needed. I counted 375 times that the Bible calls us to remember or to not forget. It's because we are so prone to forgetting what God has already done. But the positive side of that coin is that God has already been at work in your life in a way that is *worth* remembering.

## II. National, church, and family leaders can help us to remember (v. 2)

But that brings us to the second main lesson. Because of our forgetfulness, it is often helpful to have *others* help us to remember. And I'll be giving you some ideas of how you can allow others to help you to remember. In this case it was some leaders. It was representatives from all twelve tribes. In verse 2 we can see that *national* leaders were used to help the nation as a whole remember. It says,

Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from every tribe...

It takes time and effort to make good memorials and having someone designated to help establish the memorial is a good thing. Leaders in our nation have long ago set aside certain days to remember the heroism of the past - days such as July 4, Memorial Day, D-Day, Patriot Day (which is actually today - September 11), Constitution Day (Sept 16), Columbus Day (Oct 10), and several other days, some of which I would rather forget. Various states have set up different days to memorialize the heroism of Robert E. Lee, various Southern heroes, or even the Confederate cause as a whole - I think it is a cause that is worth memorializing since it reminds us of national sins, interposition, and the dangers of a super strong central government. I found it humorous that they can't get Jefferson Davis' birthday right. Mississippi memorializes Jefferson Davis' birthday on May 30, Florida on June 3, Alabama on June 6. *But* - we shouldn't look down our noses at national memorials, *if they are memorializing a good thing*. And even if the holiday is honoring an ungodly person or cause, you can use that as a reminder to pray for national repentance and change.

But it's not just *national* leaders who have set up memorial days. The church itself has set up memorial days to remember the wonderful events of redemptive history - or even post-biblical history. Why not turn some of these church calendar days into days of thanksgiving? The Westminster Confession of Faith allows for at least Thanksgiving Days. Many of the Puritans were not keen on Christmas, Resurrection Day, or other church

calendar days, but I justify them as thanksgiving days. And I don't let Roman Catholics co-opt Saint Patrick's Day either. Saint Patrick was Protestant in theology long before there was a Reformation or any Protestants, and he was a hero well worth remembering. So *days* can be a kind of memorial that other leaders have set up.

There are also national *physical* reminders of the past (both good and bad) such as Mount Rushmore, Pearl Harbor, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and a bunch of other famous ones. These can all be wonderful tools to teach our children about the good, the bad, and the ugly of our nation's past. If you want to see an ugly, ungodly, divinization and idolization of a man, go to the Lincoln memorial. It definitely treats him like a god. And when our kids went there, it became a great instructional tool. So even the bad ones can be used for instruction.

We sponsored the Providential History Festival for many years, and I have fond memories of children and adults memorializing God's amazing works of providence from the past.

Leaders have already gone before us with memorials via Christian movies and books. Family mementos can be another way of not forgetting God's mighty works from the past. So you can conscript other leaders to bring healthy memorials to your family. They've already done the hard work for you. I'm half way through Peter Hammond's autobiography, and have found it to be a very moving encouragement to serve the Lord. Take advantage of what other leaders have memorialized.

### III. Memorials aren't a waste of time (v. 3a - "command them")

But that leads to the third lesson. Memorials aren't a waste of time. When I was younger I didn't care for any kind of memorial. They seemed like a waste of time. But I have come to realize over time that memorials are a wonderful tool. Verse 3 begins with the words, "And commanded them, saying..." If God commanded this memorial of stones through the prophet Joshua, then it was not a waste of time to do it.

Some people are so pragmatic that they can't appreciate the need to stop and think about the past. They are too busy getting on with the present. But God wants us to take time off to think about the past - even our immediate past. Psalm 107 is a long history of various ways that God has blessed His people, yet they have forgotten and therefore are not thankful. God satisfies His people with food, yet they are not thankful. God makes our gardens grow, yet we are not thankful. When God gives you an amazing escape from death in a car accident, don't just thank God at *that* time. From time to time remember these amazing deliverances and let it stir your heart up to gratitude and faith in God's providence. Gil shared a couple of those things with me yesterday. The constant refrain of Psalm 107 is, "Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" It's not a waste of time to engage in various ways of memorializing the past - whether its through a good book, a visit to a memorial, taking your children to see a great-grandparents grave, etc. It's not a waste of time. God has built mankind to need memorials. Even Adam and Eve had a memorial in the Sabbath *before* they fell. They were to memorialize God's week of creation every Sabbath.

#### IV. Memorials don't have to be costly to be effective (v. 3b "twelve stones")

The fourth lesson is an encouraging one. Memorials don't have to be costly to be effective. Praise God for this point! This was just a pile of stones. The only cost was the labor involved in moving them and the time carved out of their schedule to do so. Of course, those two items are the things we find the hardest to sacrifice: time and effort. It is sometimes inconvenient to think up creative ways of remembering the past.

But let me give you a couple of inexpensive ideas of how you can bring memorials into your family. You can link key stories of God's working in your life to photo albums. Almost everyone has a photo album, right? My parents were great at this. Almost every picture was a memorial of God's grace at work in and through them. Every time my dad showed a slide, he talked about what God had done at that time. My mom would do this too. If you want to get her going on stories, have her pull out her photo albums. Linking stories to photos made the stories burn into our memories. Don't exclude God from those photographs. That is a very inexpensive way of memorializing.

Here's another idea. If you are one of those people who likes to point out historical sites as you drive along, or the changes that have happened to our city, then try incorporating into your recitation key events in the advance of the Gospel or in the spiritual malaise of this city. When you drive your family past your old house, you can recite different stories each time of things that glorified God there. Kids love to hear stories. Or as another example, when you are driving by Creighton University, you could point out that the University is approximately the place where the original Creighton erected the first telegraph pole was erected connecting Omaha to the West Coast and actually linking the East Coast to the West. That may seem like a piece of secular history, but it was momentous in the spread of the Gospel in many ways as Christians themselves took advantage of that technology. But there are many sites in Omaha to show how painfully slow Christianity advanced in this city - and why. And the history of Omaha gives the reasons why this was called "Sin City." It was a cowboy town with prostitutes, alcohol, gambling, crime, seances, mistreatment of the Indians, and other awful things. Just a few years ago, a couple hundred of us pastors from the Omaha area gathered to break some curses that were pronounced by Indians over this city because of a broken treaty and the mistreatment they received, and to ask God to remove some other legal ground that demons might claim. Sometimes these buildings and places can be training ground for our children.

Another simple idea is to have mementos in your home that remind you of a spiritual commitment that you made, or a victory, or a Christian milestone of the past. Some people have items on the wall that remind them of stories from a great grandmother. I have an antique clock that does the same thing relating to Kathy's parents. Actually this tie I am deliberately wearing was worn by Kathy's grandpa Olson. I can't wear it without thinking of Kathy's Christian heritage.

My grandpa Remington did a detailed analysis of our family's history on my mom's side going back almost 1000 years. And I'm so glad my mom converted his handwriting into typed text. I hope to eventually write some children's books memorializing God's grace

through my missionary parents and some earlier ancestors. So there are various ways that you can stir up your mind to thankfulness and encourage your faith through inexpensive memorials. Anyone can do it.

## V. Memorials can use the courage of the past to inspire courage today (v. 3)

The fifth lesson is found in the rest of verse 3 - we can use memorials to instill virtues in our children. In my mind this is one of the best benefits of memorials. Verse 3 says,

and command them, saying, “Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.”

What were the virtues being instilled through this memorial? I believe it was faith, courage, and stamina. Later generations would be told, “Hey, these stones were taken from the very place where the four priests stood in the middle of that river carrying the ark of the covenant. Children, notice the water erosion on the rocks. These are clearly river rocks. And God parted the water when those priests stepped into the water. The water was piling up higher and higher above their heads until it became a 120 foot tall menacing wall of water. But they stood their ground firm until everyone had crossed over. They stood carrying the heavy ark all day despite sore backs and tiredness. They persevered.” The point is that we can learn from the faith, courage, and stamina of those priests to have faith, courage, and stamina today as well.

I have benefited in a similar way from many memorials. I have been challenged by Southern war heroes as well as Northern war heroes to seek by God’s grace to be a better man. There are some movies that act as memorials to me that move me to tears and prayers to God to help me be like them. When I watched the film *Braveheart* on Clearplay and then later out of curiosity I read the literature on William Wallace (and the movie did mess things up), it gave me a very vivid and emotional reminder of how important it is to stand firm for principle. Memorials aid the perseverance, courage and bravery of God’s people, and they make us rightfully outraged at the compromises of tyrants.

And by the way - that is why tyrants *hate* any memorials that remind people of these Biblical principles. And that’s why they always try to rewrite history. They make people forget about their past. That’s what the government schools have done with the history books. Even when my wife was a little kid, the grade school and high school history books had become false revisionist propaganda history (which my father-in-law recognized and corrected). But those history books are far worse now. So remembering the past is critically important for restoring liberty.

There is a reason why the woke community and the critical race community in America has been defacing and or getting rid of monuments to courageous men and women of the past. They *claim* to be destroying the memory of slavery, but most of what they have destroyed

has nothing to do with slavery. They have even been destroying the statues of anti-slavery Union officers, and of heroic immigrants, a memorial to firefighters who died during the September 11 Islamist terrorist attack. I remember back in 2020 there were over 180 statues taken down or defaced within four months - and the attacks go on. Why would they do that? I believe it is because those memorials are memorials of men and women whose writings and actions stand against the Marxist principles of the critical race theory movement. And they completely undermine what has been taught for generations in government schools. Memorials need to be defended. We can't take a who-cares attitude when a statue of Robert E. Lee or George Washington is defaced or when pressure is put on the local governments to remove them. Think about the *real* reasons for this modern movement to erase history. History is a bulwark for true liberty. And blacks like Walter Williams, Virgil Walker, and Darrel Harris have been doing a wonderful job of speaking against this critical race theory nonsense. But most people are fearful of doing so. They don't want to be blackballed. Well, they have failed to learn the true meaning of those memorials, which are calls to courage, principle, standing for law, willingness to lay down our lives for liberty. Were those men and women perfect? No. And the ultraradicals will point that out. But here's the thing: there never will be perfect people to memorialize, but we can focus on what is honorable in them.

## VI. There can be a corporate dimension to memorials (vv. 4-5)

The sixth lesson is that there can be a corporate dimension to memorials that helps to establish a sense of unity and cohesiveness within the whole body of Christ. They help to counteract tribalism. Denominationalism can easily make us forget that the church of Jesus Christ is very broad. Let's read verses 4-5:

Josh. 4:4 Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; 5 and Joshua said to them: "Cross over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel,

We see twelve tribes being represented as one body in this memorial, and they were finding their unity in passing before the ark, which represented Jesus and His cause. And His cause was well-encapsulated in Numbers 10:35, which says that every single time that the ark moved (which would include this time) they were supposed to say, "Rise up, O LORD! Let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You." By crossing before the ark they were committing themselves to battle, but were also acknowledging that God alone could give them success. They were united around God and His cause, not just around a tribal leader or some denomination. Every time we memorialize Christ's death in the Lord's Supper we testify that there is one body. A sense of history can help us to have a sense of unity even when there are tribal differences and even when there are denominational differences that we value.

Let me give you another memorial that does the same thing. November 6 will be IDOP Day - the International Day of Prayer in which churches all over the world focus intensely in

praying for the well-being of the entire church - and especially praying for persecuted Christians around the world. God does not want us feeling completely cut off from Christians of the past or Christians of the present around the world. Memorials can help with that. And that International Day of Prayer is one such memorial.

## VII. These stones were to function as both a “sign” (v. 6) and a “memorial” (v. 7)

The seventh lesson is that these stones were intended to function as both a sign and a memorial. There is a difference in meaning between the two.

The Hebrew word for “sign” (ot - אֹת) is something visible that points to something else. That Hebrew word was used of miracles because miracles were signs that pointed to the authenticity of a prophet or of someone else. Blood on the doorposts of houses in Egypt was called a sign because it pointed to Jesus covering that household as their Passover. It was a sign to the death angel that it needed to pass over that household. Circumcision was a sign. The rainbow is called a sign of God’s covenant faithfulness to creation. The point of every usage of the term is that just as a road sign points you in the right direction and gives you guidance, these stones were to point people to two spiritual lessons that we will look at in a bit under a later point.

But let’s read verses 6-7.

6 that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, “What do these stones mean to you?” 7 Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.”

Notice that he didn’t say, “What do these stones mean to God?” but what do they mean to you?” They were intended to be *personal*. Do *you* have any road signs that can point your children to real life situations in your own history of God’s incredible working? It doesn’t even have to be official. A few years ago our granddaughter Kaley was a bit concerned about whether we would have enough food when a large crowd of visitors unexpectedly showed up at the church. And Kathy used that as an opportunity to have Kaley and her pray that God would multiply the food. And He did. And after everyone had had their fill, she took Kaley past the food line to see the large amounts of leftovers that God had allowed to be there, and then to pray a prayer of thanksgiving. That food line can forever be a memorial to her that God knows how to provide. It’s not an official memorial, but it can be a reminder.

And this isn’t just for your own benefit. The last verse of the chapter says, “that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.” We want God’s power and grace to be visible to others as well - and memorials can help to accomplish that. We will look at the meaning of this sign in verses 8-9, but we need signs, road posts, markers in our lives that point others to God’s



personal working with us. And in a bit I will give you a few more examples of how to do that.

But the second thing these stones are called is a memorial; something to keep us from forgetting. A memorial is a memory jogger. Memorials are great ways of keeping alive important values, memories, traditions, and mandates. July 4 sparks a remembrance and perhaps even a rebuke to the people who have taken our nation away from its Biblical roots.

### VIII. As a “memorial... forever” it connects past with future (v. 7)

The next lesson shows that a memorial connects the past with the future. Verse 7 ends, “And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.” It is transporting history into the future for generation after generation. I know *I* need things to jog *my* memory. We have recordings of my parents that we can go back to. Some people jog their memories by reading back through their journals once a year. I found an old journal I had kept before I got married, and I was encouraged all over again by some of the incredible things God had done for me. Other people go through their collectibles, and each collectible item has a memory that they can talk other people through. When the grandkids ask, “Why do you have that funny stitched picture that looks so odd?” it gives an opportunity for the grandparent to explain God’s goodness from the past that this stitched picture reminds her of.

But the most important aspect of that sentence in verse 7 is that we must pass on that faith to future generations, and we must pass on an *accurate* history of God’s dealings with His people. Obviously if we haven’t experienced God’s wonders and His power that we looked at last week, then we won’t be able to pass these things on.

### IX. Don’t just believe this in theory - schedule a time to set up memorials (v. 8a)

The next lesson can be seen in the first part of verse 8. “And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua...” It’s not enough to nod agreement with the theory of memorials. We need to make notes to ourselves of ways that we can make our national, religious, and personal memorials more effective on passing on the faith from generation to generation. Schedule a time to set up memorials, or visit memorials, or to turn already existing items in your home into memory jogging memorials.

## **X. The two memorials spoke to two dimensions of God's grace (vv. 8-9)**

This particular memorial was geographically divided into two parts and communicated two aspects of God's grace. So this is the last point.

The first part was set up a fair ways away from the river and the second part was smack dab in middle of the river and covered with water. It became invisible.

### **A. The stones in Gilgal (vv. 8, 19-20) were a reminder that God had raised them to a new life by His power**

They first took water smoothed stones out of the middle of the river and carried them up a hill to Gilgal where they camped. Verse 8 says,

And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there.

This was a permanent testimony that their life in the new land was not to be by their own power but was to be by the power of Almighty God. This symbolized resurrection life; supernatural life.

### **B. The stones in the river (v. 9) were a reminder that their old life was dead and gone**

The second part is given in verse 9.

Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day.

So they took stones from the East side of the River and put them in the middle of the river so that the water would completely cover them. Why did Joshua go to the trouble of placing twelve stones in the middle of a river where no one would be able to see them? It was because this second set of twelve stones symbolized the old life which was buried forever and which they would leave behind them forever, no longer to see. They would *remember* it in a right way, but they would not have to be bound by it. They had burned their bridges behind them and were now committed to conquest in the future. In Joshua 5:9 it says,

then the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." Therefore the name of the place is called Gilgal to this day.

In a very real sense they had died to their old life and risen to a new life in Canaan. The stones representing their old life were buried and hidden and the stones that went to Gilgal were stones that no one but God could have resurrected. There wasn't any man alive who could have lifted those heavy stones out of the Jordan unless God had parted the waters. So

they represent the new life in Christ which He achieved by His power alone. And all of it was by grace.

A couple of months ago Aaron Fox gave a wonderful talk on memorials at the Thursday morning's prayer breakfast - which I think all of you men would enjoy. And you might want to ask Aaron for a copy of that (if he still has it). I thought it was great. But if this morning's message can at least encourage you to *start* using memorials I will have achieved my purpose. Brothers and sisters, don't forget God's faithfulness in the past. Allow memorials to stir up your faith to trust God in the future. Let's pray.