

Joshua Chapter 4

Verses 1-24

The chapter presents the dynamic truth that the hope of the future is based on the memories of the past, and this hope gives meaning to the present.

Verses 1-8

Twelve stones picked up from the riverbed became a memorial to God's faithfulness.

They were set up at Gilgal (about 1-1/4 miles from Jericho), which was Israel's first campsite in the invaded land (verses 19-20).

Placing 12 stones in the riverbed itself commemorated the place which God dried up, where His ark had been held, and where He showed by a miracle His mighty presence and worthiness of respect (verses 9-11, 21-24).

Joshua 4:1 "And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over Jordan, that the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying,"

"That the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying":

As follows.

We can see by "and" beginning this chapter, that it is closely related to the last chapter.

In the last lesson, we saw the priests walk a few steps into the Jordan River with the ark of the Covenant.

The water stopped flowing and stood in a heap, until the people all crossed.

This lesson begins with all the people on the west bank of the Jordan.

Now Joshua will receive further instructions from God.

Joshua 4:2 "Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man,"

Joshua before this, ordered twelve men to be taken from among them, which seems to have been done of himself.

And now he has a direction from God for it, and what to employ them in.

"Out of every tribe a man":

So that what they did was in the name of the several tribes, and as representing them.

Joshua 4:3 "And command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan, out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm, twelve stones, and ye shall carry them over with you, and leave them in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night."

"Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan":

So that they were obliged to go back into the midst of Jordan, having already passed over it, as appears from (Joshua 4:1).

"Out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm":

Where being stones, they chose to stand upon them, and which were a firm standing for them.

And which secured them from the slime and mud at the bottom of the river the waters left behind.

Though it is not absolutely necessary to understand it that they were to take, and did take, the stones from under their feet, but those that lay about the place where they stood.

"Twelve stones":

Each man a stone; and, according to the Samaritan Chronicle, every man inscribed his name on the stone.

"And ye shall carry them over with you":

From the place they took them up, to the place they should next stop at.

"And leave them in the lodging place, where you shall lodge this night":

Which was in the place afterwards called Gilgal (Joshua 4:19).

The twelve men that had been chosen (one from each tribe), were each to pick up a stone where the priests had stood and bring it to the west side of the Jordan, to be set up as a memorial of their crossing.

These twelve men had to do this just before the water came back into the Jordan River.

The verses are not in chronological order.

Verses 4-11

Some suggest a contradiction here with (Joshua 3:17), where the Israelites are reported to have already crossed the Jordan.

Actually (verses 4 and 5), simply report that “twelve men”, one from each tribe, were commanded to go back where the priest remained standing in the midst of the dry bed of the “Jordan”.

Once there, they were to take up “twelve stones” and carry them to the west bank of the Jordan and build a memorial of rough stones commemorating this event.

Verse 9, records that Joshua had another set of stones set up to mark the place where the “priests” stood “in the midst of Jordan”.

Only after all of this had been done and all the people had passed over did the priests leave their post and finish crossing the river (verses 10-11).

Joshua 4:4 "Then Joshua called the twelve men, whom he had prepared of the children of Israel, out of every tribe a man:"

It may be for some other purpose (Joshua 3:12); but this was the destination of them eventually, and as by divine direction.

"Out of every tribe a man":

As he had before ordered, and was now directed to.

Joshua 4:5 "And Joshua said unto them, Pass over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of Jordan, and take you up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder, according unto the number of the tribes of the children of Israel:"

The twelve men.

"Pass over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of Jordan":

That is, they were to go back to Jordan again, which they had passed over, and go into the midst of it, where the priests were bearing the ark.

For it is not to be imagined that the ark went along with them, or followed them, they going before it.

But they went where that was, just before it, from where they were to take the stones, as next directed.

"And take you up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder":

By which it appears they were large stones they were to take.

Not what they could carry in their hands, but what they were obliged to take upon their shoulders.

"According unto the number of the tribes of the children of Israel":

Who had that day passed over Jordan, of which these stones were to be a memorial.

These stones were not just little stones.

They were large enough that each man brought one out on his shoulder.

It was as if they lay their load of sin down in the River, and they picked up the load of their cross and took it with them.

The number twelve is a representative number.

These twelve men represented every individual in their tribe.

The crossing of the Red sea was symbolic of water baptism.

The wandering in the wilderness symbolizes the walk of the Christian through life.

The crossing of Jordan into their Promised Land symbolizes the Christian entering into heaven.

The stones carried into the Promised Land are a memorial to their successful entry.

The Christians are spoken of as lively stones.

1 Peter 2:5 "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

What they received in the Promised Land was by grace.

The Christian is saved by grace.

We will see in these Israelites that they received cities they had not built, and crops they had not planted.

By grace are ye saved, not of yourself.

Not only does "Canaanland" symbolize heaven, but it, also, symbolizes the walk of grace of the Christian.

Joshua 4:6 "That this may be a sign among you, [that] when your children ask [their fathers] in time to come, saying, What [mean] ye by these stones?"

A commemorative one.

"That when your children ask their fathers in time to come":

Or "tomorrow".

And so in all time, or any time hereafter.

"Saying, what mean you by these stones?"

What is the reason of setting them up, and in this place, and being just of such a number?

In many places in the Bible, stones have been erected in a memorial for something special God has done.

Even the secular world would erect stones to remember some special event.

The children of Israel, who are not born at this time, will look at these stones and ask what they are for?

Their parents are to relate the happenings here to them.

Joshua 4:7 "Then ye shall answer them, That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it passed over Jordan, the waters of Jordan were cut off: and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever."

By informing them of the design and use of them.

"That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the Covenant of the LORD; when it passed over Jordan":

The waters below from those that were above, which stood up on a heap.

So that they were divided and separated from each other and made dry land for a passage of the children of Israel.

And this was done before, and in the presence of the ark of the Covenant.

To show that it was owing to the power of God, of whose presence the ark was a symbol.

"The waters of Jordan were cut off":

Which is repeated for the confirmation of it.

And that it might be taken notice of as a very marvelous event, and to be ascribed to the divine omnipotence and goodness.

"And these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever":

Which, whenever seen and observed by them, would put them in mind of this wonderful appearance of God for them.

The Jordan River stood between the people and the Promised Land.

There were no bridges handy for them to cross over.

God provided them a way through the bottom of the river.

When the priests stood in the edge of the water, the river stopped flowing and stood in heaps at either side of the way God provided.

The stones were taken out of the river bed, and set up on the western bank of the river in memory of this event.

Christians are led by the Spirit of God, as these people were led by the presence of God in the ark.

We too, must explain to our children of the wonderful things of God.

Joshua 4:8 "And the children of Israel did so as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones out of the midst of Jordan, as the LORD spake unto Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them unto the place where they lodged, and laid them down there."

The repetition of details (see 4:5), is a standard Hebrew literary technique intended to emphasize that the people obeyed God's instructions exactly.

It also underscores the importance of following God's instructions to the letter.

These stones were taken from the place in the middle of the Jordan, and placed on the land where the children of Israel lodged.

Joshua 4:9 "And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests which bare the ark of the covenant stood: and they are there unto this day."

At first glance, this verse seems to say that Joshua built his own memorial "in the midst of Jordan" in addition to the memorial set up on the bank.

However, the Hebrew grammar indicates that the author has stopped the action to provide some back-ground information.

Thus, this verse simply describes the source of the same stones referred to (in verse 8), not their final resting place.

It is highly doubtful that any stones placed in the middle of the Jordan as a memorial would be visible year after year, because the annual floodwaters would scatter them.

It appears from this Scripture, that the chosen men of the twelve tribes carried twelve large stones into the water and left a memorial in the midst of the river.

They took another twelve stones from the midst of the river, and set them up on the western bank of Jordan.

It is as if they lay their earthly burdens down, and picked up their cross to follow the LORD.

It is as if they had left the law in the river, and accepted the grace God provided them.

Joshua 4:10 "For the priests which bare the ark stood in the midst of Jordan, until every thing was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua: and the people hasted and passed over."

Though on dry ground, the waters being divided.

"Until everything was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua":

Until all the people had passed over Jordan, as the LORD had ordered Joshua.

To encourage them unto and go over with them (Joshua 1:2).

And which Moses, by divine direction, had given Joshua in charge to do (Deut. 31:7).

Kimchi interprets this of the setting up of the stones in Jordan, and the removal of the other to Gilgal, of which Moses said nothing to Joshua.

And though it may be true of the former, that the priests stood in Jordan till that was done, which is not certain, yet not of the latter.

For it is plain, and it is most reasonable to conclude, that the priests were come up from the midst of Jordan before Israel marched to Gilgal, or even began their march (see Joshua 4:18).

And much less is this to be understood of the stones at Ebal, as others, and so referred to (Deut. 27:2); which was not done until after Ai was taken (Joshua 8:24).

And it is not reasonable to imagine that the priests should continue in Jordan to that time.

Abarbanel thinks it refers to the words in (Joshua 1:3); which had been spoken by the LORD to Joshua, and had been expressed by Moses (Deut. 11:24).

And which he supposes were now repeated by Joshua, and the priests continued in their station until he had made an end of rehearsing them.

The last clause relating to Moses is left out in the Septuagint version.

"And the people hastened and passed over":

Not stood in fear of the waters of the river returning upon them.

Rather through an eager desire of setting their feet on the land of Canaan, and it may be to relieve the priests from their station as soon as possible.

All of the activity of moving the stones took place, while the priests were still in the river.

The people all passed over safely, and then the priests passed over safely.

The water did not begin to flow again, until the priests stepped out of the water with the ark on the west side of Jordan.

Joshua 4:11 "And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the LORD passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people."

Every one of them, as in Joshua 3:17.

"That the ark of the LORD passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people":

That is, the priests bearing the ark came out of the midst of Jordan in the sight of all the people.

Who were on the banks of it, on the other side, where they had been stationed during the passage of the people.

Though this motion of them was not until they received an order for it, of which there is an after mention.

The Septuagint version reads, "and the stones before them" (see Joshua 4:8).

The people viewing the ark carried by the priests, had several purposes.

It would give them strong courage for the battles ahead.

It would give them a knowledge that God would be with them.

It would give them knowledge that the priests were God's spiritual agents on the earth.

It would also, help them to realize that Joshua was God's choice to lead them.

Joshua 4:12 " And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spake unto them:"

Who were settled on the other side Jordan, in the countries taken from Sihon and Og.

"Passed over armed before the children of Israel":

The rest of the tribes.

"As Moses spake unto them":

Or ordered them, and as they promised they would (Num. 32:17).

We remember that their families had stayed on the eastern side of Jordan, where they had chosen grasslands.

The men 20 years old and older had come on this trip with Joshua, to help the other tribes take over their Promised Land.

They have brought their arms and are ready to fight.

Joshua 4:13 "About forty thousand prepared for war passed over before the LORD unto battle, to the plains of Jericho."

Equipped with proper armor to defend themselves, and their brethren, and annoy their enemies.

This is to be understood of such a number of the above-mentioned tribes.

Otherwise the number of all Israel that went over Jordan, even armed or fighting men, besides women and children, were five hundred thousand or more.

Now though the number of men fit for war, of these tribes, were a hundred thirty thousand, who were all, according to the original agreement, under obligation to go with their brethren over Jordan into Canaan's land.

And continue with them until it was subdued, and they had rest in it.

Yet Joshua took no more than about forty thousand of them, who we may suppose were select men, and fit for his purpose.

The rest were left to look after their flocks, their families, and their lands: these:

"Passed over before the LORD unto battle":

Over Jordan, before the ark of the LORD, as that stood in Jordan, bore by the priests there.

Being ready to engage in battle whenever it was necessary: and they went on with their brethren.

"To the plains of Jericho":

To a place afterwards called Gilgal (see Joshua 4:19).

The Septuagint version is, to the city Jericho.

This forty thousand are those of the two and one half tribes mentioned (in verse 12).

This is not the total number of armed men that they had. It appears they left some protection behind for their families.

Joshua 4:14 "On that day the LORD magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life."

The crossing of the Jordan River solidified Joshua as the nation's leader.

Because God "magnified" him, the people "feared" him (held him in highest regard), understanding that God was with Joshua just as he had been with "Moses".

This fulfilled God's promise (in 3:7).

One of the reasons for the miracle at the Jordan River, was so the people would know the same anointing was on Joshua that had been on Moses.

Israel's respect for Joshua grew greatly at the opening of the River Jordan under instructions given to them through Joshua.

Joshua 4:15 "And the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying,"

When all the people had passed over Jordan.

"Saying":

as follows.

Joshua 4:16 "Command the priests that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan."

In all places before, in this history, the ark is called the ark of the Covenant.

Here the ark of the Testimony, which signifies the same thing, the Law.

Which was both the covenant between God and the people, and a testimony of his will unto them.

The Septuagint version has both words.

"That they come up out of Jordan":

Where they stayed until all the people passed over, for the encouragement of them, and until they received this order.

This is a further explanation of God specifically telling Joshua to call the priests out of the Jordan River.

The priests obeying Joshua shows that they too, accept the words of Joshua as being direct from the LORD.

Joshua 4:17 "Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan."

In obedience to the LORD and sent them an order.

"Saying":

As follows.

"Come ye up out of Jordan":

From the midst of the river to the bank of it, which was properly an ascent.

This is just an explanation that Joshua did as God commanded him.

Joshua 4:18 "And it came to pass, when the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD were come up out of the midst of Jordan, [and] the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up unto the dry land, that the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as [they did] before."

According to the command of Joshua in the name of the LORD.

"And the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up upon the dry land.

And set upon it, on the bank of Jordan, and shores of the land of Canaan.

"That the waters of Jordan returned unto their place":

Those that came from above, and had stood on a heap, gradually came down into the channel, and those below that were cut off returned.

"And flowed over all his banks, as they did before":

And usually did at this time of the year (see Joshua 3:15).

So that there was no decrease or loss of the waters by their failing, and being cut off.

We see that the miracle of the River Jordan ceasing its flowing, was for just as long as the priests remained with the ark in the water.

The instant they removed their feet onto dry land, the water of the river flowed again as it was in the beginning.

Joshua 4:19 "And the people came up out of Jordan on the tenth [day] of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, in the east border of Jericho."

"Tenth day of the first month":

March-April.

Abib was the term used by pre-exilic Jews; Nisan later came to be used by post-exilic Israel.

The timing of the Jordan River crossing coincided with the day the Israelites selected the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12:3, 6, 18), enabling them to celebrate the Passover as their first act in the Promised Land (5:10).

Perhaps Israel camped at the Jordan for three days before crossing it (3:3), in order to achieve this timing.

Their first month (Abib), is about the same as our April.

They stopped in Gilgal, which is at the door of Jericho.

Verses 20-24

In repeating the story of God's deliverance to their children, the Israelites would bear witness of God's "mighty" power to the world and uphold the "fear" of "the LORD ... for ever" (Exodus 14:31; 15:16; 1 Kings 8:42-43; 2 Kings 19:19; Psalm 106:8).

Joshua 4:20 "And those twelve stones, which they took out of Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal."

The twelve men who were sent there for that purpose, and took them from there, and brought them here (Joshua 4:3).

"Did Joshua pitch in Gilgal":

Set them in rows, or one upon another, and made a pillar of them commemorative of their passage over Jordan into the land of Canaan.

According to Josephus, he made an altar of these stones.

And Ben Gersom is of the opinion, that they were placed in the sanctuary by the ark, though not in it.

It seems that, Joshua placed the stones, one upon another, and made a memorial with them at the camp site of Gilgal.

Joshua 4:21 "And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What [mean] these stones?"

These words (compare verses 6-7), are part of a catechetical exercise designed so that parents might educate their children as to their national and spiritual heritage (compare Exodus 12:26-27; Deut. 6:20-23).

The proper parental training of children is a God-given privilege and responsibility (compare Prov. 1:8-9; 22:6; 28:7, 29:15, 17).

Joshua 4:22 "Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land."

The meaning of the erection of these stones, acquaint them with the whole history, the meaning of which they are designed to perpetuate.

"Saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land":

And if they should ask how that could possibly be done, or if they did not, they were to inform them by what means it was brought about, as follows.

Generations to come would see the stones erected here, and ask why they were there.

They are to tell them of the miracle of the crossing of the Jordan River here.

Joshua 4:23 "For the LORD your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red sea, which he dried up from before us, until we were gone over:"

As this is supposed to be said in future time.

And to persons who were not upon the spot when this was done, and so entirely ignorant of the affair.

It is not to be understood of them personally, but of the same people they were of.

The people of Israel in former times, of their ancestors, and of them in them.

The benefits of which they enjoyed by possessing the land of Canaan their fathers were at this time introduced into.

"As the LORD your God did to the Red sea, which he dried up from before us, until we were gone over":

For though the generation of men, for the most part, was dead, that passed through the Red sea.

Yet as Joshua himself, and Caleb and Eleazar, and it may be some others that were not among the murmurers.

But were still living, for whom that miracle was wrought, this way of speaking is very properly made use of.

And especially when it is observed, that there were many of the present generation than the young, which passed over, and even those unborn were in and represented by their ancestors.

And who enjoyed the advantages of that wonderful mercy.

So these two strange events are joined together, as instances of divine power and goodness (in Psalm 114:3).

In both of these instances, the water stood in a heap at their sides as they crossed through on dry ground.

The only real difference was in the way it dried up.

The Jordan River dried up as the priests stepped into the water.

There were no priests at the time of the Red Sea crossing.

The Red Sea crossing symbolized leaving the world (Egypt), behind and passing through the water (baptism).

The crossing of the Jordan symbolized receiving heaven.

Joshua 4:24 "That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the LORD, that it [is] mighty: that ye might fear the LORD your God for ever."

Even almighty, and can do that which is marvelous and surprising, and above the power of nature to effect.

Things unsearchable and past finding out, which cannot be expressed, or conceived how and by what means they are brought about.

This the very Heathens would own and acknowledge when they should see these stones.

And be told the meaning of them, or should hear of this amazing event.

"That ye might fear the LORD your God for ever":

As the above-mentioned end was to be answered among the people of the earth by these stones, this among the people of Israel.

Who upon sight of them would call to mind the power and goodness of God, which would serve to keep an awe of his majesty on their mind.

A due reverence of him and his greatness, and engage them to fear, serve, and worship him.

Who by such acts as these had abundantly showed himself to be the only true and living God, and the covenant God of them his people Israel.

The Septuagint version is, "that ye may worship the LORD your God in every work."

This last verse shows that this reaches much farther, than just that time.

This is a sign not to these Hebrews, but to all of mankind.

Every time they read the Bible, they should be able to see the hand of God in this.

This should encourage every Christian to realize all over again, that we serve a Mighty God.

Joshua Chapter 4 Questions

1. How do we know this is a continuation of the last lesson?
2. What were the twelve men to take out of the Jordan?
3. What were they to do with them?
4. The verses are not always in _____ order.
5. Why was the shoulder where they carried the stones?

6. It was as if they had lain their load of _____ down in the river.
7. The carrying out of the stones was as if they had taken what upon their shoulders?
8. The number twelve is a _____ number.
9. What they received in the Promised Land was by _____.
10. They received cities, they had not _____.
11. They received crops, they had not _____.
12. What does "Canaanland" symbolize?
13. Who will these stones be a sign to?
14. Who used stones as memorials?
15. The _____ stood between the people and the Promised Land.
16. _____ provided them a way through the river.
17. What happened when the priests stepped into the river carrying the ark?
18. Christians are led by the _____ of God.
19. Where were the stones placed?
20. Why was it twelve stones the leaders picked up?
21. Where were the two memorials set up?
22. Symbolically, what had they left in the river?
23. Why did the ark pass over in the sight of the people?
24. Who, from the east side of Jordan, passed over ready for battle?
25. How many men with them were ready for war?
26. Verse 14 says, The LORD magnified _____ in the sight of all Israel.
27. What helped the people have more confidence in Joshua?
28. Who told the priests to come out of the Jordan River?
29. When did the water in the Jordan begin to flow again?
30. What day did the people come up out of the water?

31. What was Israel to tell generations to come about the stones erected on the west of Jordan?
32. How far will this knowledge of the mighty hand of God reach?