Israel Remembers God's Deeds

Josh 4:14-24
SS Lesson for 09/13/2026

Devotional Scripture: Ps 145:3-7

OUTLINE

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Following the death of Moses and his generation, a change in Israelite leadership occurred (see Numbers 27:12-23). Important events take place between the text for last week's lesson (Joshua 1:1-11) and the text of this week's study. Before entering the land of Canaan, Joshua sent spies to explore the land in general and the city of Jericho in particular (2:1). The lives of these spies were saved by Rahab, a Canaanite woman in Jericho (2:2-22). When the spies returned to Joshua, they reported that Israelite victory in the land was certain (2:24). Having received the positive news, Joshua led the people from Shittim to the Jordan River, about five miles west, where they camped for three days (Joshua 3:1-2). We might wonder why there is a need to camp for this time after a (perhaps) three-hour walk. One possible answer to that question considers the sheer number of people involved. An earlier census indicates that there were more than 600,000, counting only men aged twenty and older (Numbers 26:2, 51). That number could easily have been tripled or more by adding women and children. Time is required to communicate with and coordinate everything for so many people (Joshua 3:1-6). What followed was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River. Every miracle was intended to highlight the presence of the Lord with Joshua and the Israelites (Joshua 3:7). Priests carrying the ark went ahead of the people and entered the river. At that moment, the waters upstream stopped flowing, just as Joshua had promised (Joshua 3:14-16). As long as the priests and the ark remained in the riverbed, the Israelites could cross over on dry ground. Joshua then selected twelve men, one from each tribe, and instructed them to each choose a stone from the middle of the temporarily dry riverbed (4:1-3). These stones were arranged in such a way as to serve as a sign or memory device to following generations regarding the Lord's deliverance at that very location (4:6-7). As today's lesson begins, almost all the Israelites have crossed the Jordan River on dry ground. Those who hadn't completed the crossing, namely, the priests with the Ark of the Covenant, exit last (Joshua 4:10-13).

Key Verses: Joshua 4:21-22

21 Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?' 22 then you shall let your children know, saying, 'Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land'

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Remembering God's Provisions (Josh 4:14-18)

14 On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they had feared Moses, all the days of his life.
15 Then the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying,
16 "Command the priests who bear the ark of the Testimony to come up from the Jordan."
17 Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan."
18 And it came to pass, when the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord had come from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet touched the dry land, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks as before.

Provision of leadership authority (14)

Leadership that can be confirmed by the followers (Acts 17:11)

11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Leadership that is entrusted with God's work (Titus 1:7)

7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless — not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

Leadership that is blameless so as to encourage godliness (1 Thess 2:10-12)

10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who
believed. 11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12
encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and
glory.

Leadership that is faithful because of being given a trust (1 Cor 4:2)

2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Leadership that has integrity (Titus 2:7-8)

7 In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness 8
and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed
because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Provision of the Ark of the Covenant (15-16)

An Ark that represents atonement (Exodus 25:16-18)

16 Then put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. 17 "Make an atonement cover of pure gold —
two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide.

An Ark that aids in guidance (Josh 3:3-4)

3 giving orders to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests,
who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. 4 Then you will know
which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards
between you and the ark; do not go near it."

An Ark that will be in heaven (Rev 11:19)

19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And
there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.

Provision of guidance (17-18)

Guidance into truth (John 16:13-15)

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he
will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will bring glory to me by
taking from what is mine and making it known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is
why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

Guidance by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:18)

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Guidance into insight (Ps 119:99-100)

99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. 100 I have more understanding
than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

Guidance into understanding (Ps 119:130)

130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

Guidance into wisdom (Prov 2:6)

6 For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Remembering God's Promises (Josh 4:19-24)

19 Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho.
20 And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal.
21 Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?'
22 then you shall let your children know, saying, 'Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land';
23 for the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over,
24 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."

Promise of deliverance (19-20)

Deliverance from death (2 Cor 1:9-10)

> 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,

Deliverance from calamities (Job 5:19-21)

> 19 From six calamities he will rescue you; in seven no harm will befall you. 20 In famine he will ransom you from death, and in battle from the stroke of the sword. 21 You will be protected from the lash of the tongue, and need not fear when destruction comes.

Deliverance from troubles (Ps 34:19)

> 19 A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all;

Deliverance from trials (2 Peter 2:9)

> 9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Deliverance from temptation (1 Cor 10:13)

> 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Deliverance that sometimes brings double blessings (Job 42:10-11)

> 10 After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before. 11 All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring.

Promise of answers to questions (21-22)

Promise of answers that must be sought (Matt 7:7-8)

> 7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Promise of answers that seek gifts from God (John 4:10)

> 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Promise of answers that are asked in Jesus' name (John 16:24)

> 24 Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Promise of answers for wisdom (James 1:5)

> 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

Promise of God's power (23-24)

God's power is majestic (Exodus 15:6-7)

> 6 "Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy. 7 In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble.

God's power is known (Ps 62:11-12)

> 11 One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, 12 and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.

God's power is mighty (Ps 147:5)

> 5 Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.

God's power cannot be turned back (Isa 14:27)

> 27 For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Roger Pascoe

We Need To Remember What God Has Done (4:1-24)

Here the details of the story of crossing the Jordan are reiterated and fresh details are added. Such an awesome event as this had to be memorialized as a testimony to the present and future generations of the mighty power of God.

In the grammatical construction of 4:1, the author not only connects back to 3:17 but also indicates progression to the next stage of the narrative: *After the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord spoke to Joshua (4:1)* concerning...

A. The memorial stones gathered from the Jordan for Gilgal (4:1-8). *[2] "Choose twelve men from the people, one man for each tribe, [3] and command them: Take twelve stones from this place in the middle of the Jordan where the priests are standing, carry them with you, and set them down at the place where you spend the night" (4:2-3).*

While the author had earlier made reference to choosing twelve men (3:12), seemingly without connecting them to any specific task, it seems that now in 4:2 he describes what their task is - to select twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan and *carry them with you, and set them down at the place where you spend the night (4:3)*. Soon we will discover where their camp is and what the stones' purpose is (cf. 4:20-24). By splitting the story into these non-chronological segments, the author not only heightens the tension of the narrative as we wait for it to unfold, but he also expands the details as the story progresses.

In all of the movement of people and stones that is taking place here in and across the Jordan, everything and everybody is protected from the return of the waters by the ark, held by the priests who are standing in the middle of the Jordan right where the stones are to be selected (4:3). Thus, the ark, the symbol of God's presence, does not move so long as the waters are cut off. God dwells with his people; he does not abandon them.

In 3:7-8, the Lord gives Joshua the instructions for the priests to carry the ark to the edge of the Jordan. When Joshua repeats this to the Israelites, he adds the details about the waters of the Jordan being cut off when the priests' feet come to rest in the river (3:13). Similarly, now the Lord tells Joshua to choose twelve men who are to select twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan *"where the priests are standing"* and to carry them to their camp (4:2-3). But, again, when Joshua repeats this to the twelve men (4:4-5), he adds the details as to the purpose for, and significance of, these stones: *"[6]… so that this will be a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean to you?' [7] you should tell them, 'The water of the Jordan was cut off in front of the ark of the* Lord*'s covenant. When it crossed the Jordan, the Jordan's water was cut off.' Therefore these stones will always be a memorial for the Israelites" (4:6-7).*

Now we know the purpose for these stones. They would be a *"sign among you"* (the current generation), pointing them back to, and constantly reminding them of, this moment and this experience of God's grace and presence and power. And these stones would also be a permanent memorial for future generations (*"your children"*) when they ask: *"What do these stones mean to you?" (4:6).* The current generation is thus charged with the responsibility of telling and re-telling the story of their experience here to future generations who did not experience or cannot remember this moment. These stones would *"always be a memorial for the Israelites" (4:7),* giving the current participants of this mighty deed the opportunity to testify to the saving grace of God - who God is and what He did at the Jordan.

That's what memorials do – they give permanent visual and verbal reminders of the past. Such reminders are so vitally necessary for us, not only to remember what God has done and who He is but also to encourage us when circumstances get tough. The Israelites would need this reminder when they face tough times ahead as they take possession of the land. And it's a good practice for us to remember our past experiences with God, to look back constantly at what God has done in our lives. It's so easy to forget how God has intervened, provided, defended, and guided us over the years. This, of course, is what our church communion services are all about. They are designed to remind us of what the Lord has done for us at the cross so that we never forget.

Notice that, even though $2^1/_2$ tribes of the Israelites had been assigned their land inheritance on the other side of the Jordan (in accordance with Moses' agreement with the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh in Numbers 32), Joshua makes clear by the selection of these twelve men from each tribe and the number of stones to be collected that Israel is still one people.

So, *the Israelites did just as Joshua had commanded them (4:8a).* Joshua was God's mouthpiece to the people, just as Moses had been before him. Notice the chain of command here: God commanded Joshua, Joshua repeated those commands to the people, and the people (through the agency of the twelve representative men whom Joshua had chosen) carried them out. *The twelve men took stones from the middle of the Jordan, one for each of the Israelite tribes, just as the Lord had told Joshua. They carried them to the camp and set them down there (4:8b).*

After gathering the memorial stones from the Jordan for the camp at Gilgal, another set of stones is set up.

B. The marker stones set up in the middle of the Jordan (4:9). It has been suggested that both these sets of stones are actually only one set, but I don't think that suggestion fits with the text. The text specifically states that the first set of twelve stones was carried by the twelve men from the middle of the Jordan to the camp (4:8), where they would be set up as a permanent memorial (4:20). Whereas the second set of twelve stones was set up by Joshua as a marker *in the middle of the Jordan where the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant were standing (4:9a).* Furthermore, the text states that those *stones* (the second set) *are still there to this day (4:9b)* – i.e. in the middle of the river, not at Gilgal. So, these are two different sets of stones. The first set would be a permanent memorial to remind the people of this experience and what God did, and the second set would be a permanent marker of the very place where God stopped the waters of the Jordan from flowing, the very spot where the priests stood holding the ark of the covenant while the people crossed over.

In conclusion (and by way of summary), 4:10 states that *the priests carrying the ark continued standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything was completed that the* Lord *had commanded Joshua to tell the people, in keeping with all that Moses had commanded Joshua.* The priests were obedient to God's word, which was communicated to them through Joshua and which, at the same time, fulfilled Moses instructions to take possession of the land (cf. Deut. 31:3-8; Num. 32:28-30).

Having established the marker stones in the middle of the Jordan and the memorial stones at the camp at Gilgal…

C. The people cross the Jordan (4:10b-14). In keeping with earlier evidences that this author's account does not necessarily follow a chronological sequence, what is described in 4:2-9 seems to have taken place after the people crossed over and before the priests crossed over and the waters returned. Thus, connecting back to 3:17 (*all Israel crossed on dry ground)* and 4:1 (*After the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan…*), the text now says, ***10b*** *The people hurried across* ***11*** *and after everyone had finished crossing, the priests with the ark of the* Lord *crossed in the sight of the people (4:10b-11)*. Now, the attention now shifts from the stones (4:2-9) back to the crossing, the last step of which was the crossing of the priests.

This step highlights the climax and completion of this marvellous and miraculous crossing, pointing forward to the battle of Jericho to come. The question it raises in the minds of the readers is, "Will the Israelites' possession of the Promised Land be as miraculous as the crossing of the Jordan? Will the taking of Jericho be as powerful and dramatic as the crossing of the Jordan? Will God give the people victory over the walls of Jericho as he gave them victory over the waters of the Jordan?"

In accordance with their earlier agreement with Moses, the 2½ tribes, who received their inheritance from Moses on the other side of the Jordan (cf. Josh. 1:13-18; Num. 32), now assemble near Jericho, ready to assist their brethren in the assault on that city. ***12*** *The Reubenites, Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh went in battle formation in front of the Israelites, as Moses had instructed them.* ***13*** *About forty thousand equipped for war crossed to the plains of Jericho in the* Lord*'s presence (4:12-13)*. As we have seen repeatedly in this episode, the emphasis seems to be (1) on the people's obedience to God's word, to Joshua's word, and here to Moses' word, and (2) on the people's unity, despite geographical separation on either side of the Jordan.

D. God exalts Joshua (4:14). What God had promised Joshua in 3:7 now is confirmed. *On that day the* Lord *exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they revered him throughout his life, as they had revered Moses (4:14)*. Everything comes about just as God said. It's instructive to see not only the people's obedience to commands from God and Joshua, but also that God himself always keeps his word. God must be obeyed because his word is totally trustworthy.

After setting up the marker stones in the middle of the Jordan and the memorial stones at the camp at Gilgal, the people cross the Jordan. This is followed by God exalting Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and…

E. Then, the waters of the Jordan return (4:15-18). Again, the narrative seems to back up in order to make connection with what has already been mentioned (i.e. the priests' crossing in 4:11) and to complete the chronological sequence of events. In accordance with the Lord's instructions, Joshua commands the priests to *"come up from the Jordan" (4:17)*.

This is the final step of the crossing and its dramatic finale *when the priests carrying the ark of the Lord's covenant came up from the middle of the Jordan (4:18a)*. The priests are still faithfully carrying the ark, that visible and powerful testimony to the Lord's presence among them and his covenant with them.

That the Lord had supernaturally withheld the waters of the Jordan and not any other "natural" explanation is evident in that as soon as the priest's feet *stepped out on solid ground, the water of the Jordan resumed its course, flowing over all the banks as before (4:18b)*. When the Lord withdrew his presence, his intervention was also withdrawn – nature resumes her course. And finally…

F. The memorial stones are set up in Gilgal (4:19-24). This episode cannot end until the memorial to God's power and goodness are set up in Gilgal where the people were camping *on the eastern limits of Jericho (4:19b)*. That this took place on the *tenth day of the first month (4:19a)* is significant in that it connects this "exodus" from their wilderness wanderings on the east side of the Jordan to their earlier exodus from Egypt at the time of Passover (cf. Ex. 12:3).

20 *Then Joshua set up in Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken from the Jordan,* ***21*** *and he said to the Israelites, "In the future, when your children ask their fathers, 'What is the meaning of these stones?'* ***22*** *you should tell your children, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground'" (4:20-22)*. Joshua mentions three distinct purposes for this memorial at Gilgal…

First, this memorial would be a permanent testimony to future Israelite generations of the miracle God performed in stopping the waters (as Joshua had mentioned before in 4:6-7), just as He had at the Red Sea: *"For the* Lord *your God dried up the water of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, just as the* Lord *your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up before us until we had crossed over" (4:23)*. Now Joshua links together the stopping of the waters of the Jordan with the dividing of the waters of the Red Sea, both of which made possible the Israelites' crossing from one side to the other. This is a testimony to God's goodness to them and his miraculous intervention on their behalf, an experience that would surely give them courage in the imminent battle of Jericho and all the subsequent battles as they take possession of the land.

Second, this memorial would be a permanent testimony to the world (i.e. the Canaanites) of the power of Yahweh: *"…so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the* Lord*'s hand is strong" (4:24a)*. Let all nations and enemies beware that if they oppose God and his people, they do so to their own peril for the God of Israel is all-powerful; no one can withstand him.

Third, this memorial would remind the Israelites to bow before God: *"…so that you may always fear the* Lord *your God" (4:24b)*. It's so easy to forget who God is and what He has done, even after an experience as dramatic as the crossing of the Jordan. It's so easy to fail to give God thanks and to attribute such experiences to His intervention on our behalf. This memorial would never let the Israelites forget and, in so doing, it would cause them to bow before Yahweh in reverence and to worship Him, the one true God who alone is worthy of all praise.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/3-facing-challenges-caution-and-courage-crossing-over-jordan-josh-31-424)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

We create monuments of various sorts to commemorate significant leaders, historical events, and consequential actions. But how often do we build memorials to celebrate God's work? Scripture provides several examples of God's people constructing memorials to remember and celebrate God's work. These memorials come in different forms, including physical structures (example: Genesis 28:18-22), sacred ceremonies (example: Exodus 12:14), and specific days of observance (example: 20:8-11). Despite such differences, these memorials serve a common purpose: to remember and celebrate God's faithfulness. One of Joshua's first actions as leader was to institute the memorial at Gilgal. Before the people went further into the land, they collectively paused to ensure remembrance of the Lord's providing a way to cross the Jordan River. Think about that sequence: (1) God provides, then (2) the people ensure remembrance, then (3) the people move on. Do we follow that same pattern, or do we skip step 2? If we pay attention to God's work, we will find moments where he has provided for us. When we notice God's work, we can build our own memorials to God's work. Although we may not construct a stone monument, other ways exist to remember and celebrate God's work and faithfulness.