



Text: Joshua 3:1-5:1<sup>1</sup> (Scripture Reading: Josh 3:1-4:7, 4:21-24)  
Series: Facing Life with Courage  
Title: Part 3 – Courage in Stone  
Date: May 17, 2009  
Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

The picture on the screen is one I took during the trip that Ruth and I took last summer to the UK. We visited the Castlerigg Stone circle near Keswick, England. It's an ancient site – dated to approximately 3000 BC which would make it one of the earliest stone circles in the UK and possibly in Europe. It is one of the most visited stone circles in the north of England. Over the years there has been a significant amount of research into the purpose of this stone circle, as well as many others in the UK. But after all that research, there is no clear answer to the question...

### “What do these stones mean?” Joshua 4:21

You might wonder why I'm showing you this picture of an ancient pagan stone circle from the UK when we're talking about a collection of stones near the town of Gilgal in the land of Canaan. Well, you might be interested to know that the name **Gilgal** means "circle," and may have been taken from an ancient circle of stones of pagan significance. There are several places by this name throughout the land of Canaan and they all might have been associated with stone circles.

Last week we looked at the conversion of the first person to the worship of the true God in the land of Canaan. That first person was Rahab. This week, I think we're looking at **the conversion of the first place to the worship of the true God**. Some Bible scholars suggest that by setting up these 12 stones at Gilgal, God was intentionally counteracting the pagan association with this place.<sup>2</sup>

The meaning has been lost for the ancient pagan stone circles but the meaning of the stones of Gilgal is still crystal clear today, 3500 years later. Why do we know the answer to the question, what do these stones mean? It is simply because God wants us to know. He wants us to remember. Even if those 12 stones are no longer standing,<sup>3</sup> the truth they were intended to convey still stands! There was important truth buried in this circle of stones that God does not want us to forget. It was truth that was intended by God to give his people courage as they faced the challenges of taking the land he was giving them. And

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 1:336.

<sup>3</sup> The twelve stones are mentioned in a fifth century AD mosaic map that is in the floor of an ancient church in Medeba. There is a suggestion that the stones might have been built into the structure of an ancient church but I can find no clear evidence of their existence today.



it is truth that will still give us courage, 3500 years later, as we face the challenge of living faithfully and courageously for our God.

## **What do these stones, the twelve stones of Gilgal, mean?**

### **These stones told a story**

The story was simply this: **the Lord miraculously cut off the Jordan River, allowing his people to cross into the land of promise on dry land. (Josh 4:23)**

The people arrived at the Jordan River in April – what is called “the first month” in chapter 4, verse 19. This was high water time on the river -- the waters from the slopes of Mt Hermon in the north were melting and flowing into the watershed of the Jordan River. The writer emphasized that the river was overflowing its banks (3:15) – it was at flood stage. The Jordan at this point is always difficult to cross, but at this time of the year it is especially difficult to cross here. The people were attempting to cross just above the where the Jordan River enters the Dead Sea – the river bed is just below the flood plain and some suggest that the river at flood was about a mile wide at this point. This was exactly **the wrong time of year** to try to cross the Jordan River at this point – **unless you’re looking for a miracle!**

### **And God was looking to do a miracle.**

God gave very specific directions to his people.

- The people were to “**consecrate themselves,**” to make spiritual preparation to view God perform a “wonder” before them.(3:5)
  - Part of that preparation would have involved bathing and changing their clothes – an action symbolic of making a new beginning with the Lord. (cf. Ex 19:9-15)
- The priests were to carry **the Ark of the Covenant** before the people toward the river. [c.f. **slide with graphic of the ark**]

The ark was a wooden box, covered with pure gold, that God had commanded be made – see Exodus chapter 25 for some of the details.

- It was just under four feet long, a little over two feet high and wide
- On the top of the box were two angels or cherubim, whose wings just about touched. The area on the top of the box between the angels wings was called “the mercy seat.”
- Special poles were passed through rings set into the side of the ark so that they would not have to touch it – it was holy and no one was to touch it, not even the priests!
- Inside the ark were placed three sacred objects:



1. The stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments
2. The staff of Aaron, Moses' brother (Heb 9:4)
3. And a pot of manna (Heb 9:4)

The ark represented **God's presence** with his people. God had said to Moses...

**“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”**

**Exodus 25:22**

The ark is mentioned in a variety of ways about 17 times in these two chapters of Joshua but one of the references is very important. Joshua invites the people to watch very closely as the ark is carried before them to the river. He says to the people...

**“Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan.” Joshua 3:11**

If you have an ESV translation of the Bible you'll see a note attached to this verse. It tells you that this verse can be translated this way...

**“Behold, the ark of the covenant, the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan.” Joshua 3:11**

The ark was so intimately connected with the presence of God that Joshua could say that when the ark passed before them, God passed before them. **God himself was leading them into the land!**

- As the priests made their way toward the river, the people were to stay back about 900m. (ie. 2000 cubits)
  - There were to stay back partly because it was holy, although the text doesn't focus on this.
  - They were primarily to stay back so that everyone could see what was happening – God wanted the people to see what happened the moment the priest's feet entered the river.
  - **God was about to show them the way into the land.**
- The priests, carrying the ark, were to enter the water and then **“stand still in the Jordan.” (3:8)**
  - As soon as their feet entered the river water, the river stopped flowing.
  - In fact, the writer tells us that water piled up at a town called Adam, about 16 miles up stream.
  - The ground immediately became dry – it wasn't a muddy slough!



Over the years there have been a few mudslides that have dammed up the Jordan River BUT none of these have been at flood stage.

- Even if God did use a mudslide, his timing was miraculous!

- But a mudslide can't explain why the ground was immediately dry – **that's just God!**

- Now that the river was dry, **the priests moved to the mid point of the dry river bed** and stood there while the entire nation of Israel passed by on dry ground into the land of promise
  - In the same way that God had led them out of Egypt 40 years earlier by parting the waters of **the Red Sea**, God brought them into Canaan by holding back the water of the Jordan River so that his people would cross on dry land. **(c.f. 4:23)**
  - In fact, the day the people walked across the Jordan into the land of promise – **“the tenth day of the first month”** -- was exactly the same day of the year that the people had walked out of Egypt to begin their journey forty years earlier. (cf. **Joshua 4:19 & Exodus 12:3**) **God's timing is always right!**
- **Twelve men**, one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, were chosen by Joshua and they took stones from the middle of the river where the priests stood with the ark.
  - These stones were taken to the location of their first camp that night, their first night in the land of promise, a location near the town of **Gilgal**
  - Joshua set up the 12 stones – **possibly in a circle** -- to intentionally provoke a question in the minds of future generations of God's people...

**“And he said to the people of Israel, ‘When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over....’” Joshua 4:21-23**

That's the story of the stones, but...

**“What do these stones mean?” Joshua 4:21**

**These stones spoke four eternal truths about God**

There are four key lessons that God wants his people to learn from these stones and they are still lessons we need to learn today. God was preparing the spirits of his people for the task that lay ahead. As they took possession of the land, he



wanted them to remember these foundational truths about himself and about their relationship with him.

Joshua puts these lessons into what we might think of as a “Sunday school” format. These were truths that the children needed to know. The message that the stones conveyed was simple and basic truth that everyone, even the youngest child needed to know. Joshua envisioned children asking about this day in years to come and he instructed parents on how they were to answer their children.

**First** of all, these fathers and mothers could tell their children that...

### **These stones mean that our God is the true and living God**

Joshua told the people as they prepared to witness this incredible “wonder” of God...

**“Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you...” Joshua 3:10**

These parents could tell their children that God had touched the Jordan River and stopped it in its tracks. They could also take this moment to tell their children that God had sent a great wind and opened up the Red Sea forty years earlier as the people made their way out of Egypt. In fact, they could tell their children story after story of what the living God had done for his people. They could amaze their children with the stories of God’s provision for his people and all of them were true! “Children,” they could say, “our God is alive. He has touched the earth with his hand and stopped the river just like you stop the water and make new channels for it with your hands in your play time on the banks of the river.” Do you remember making channels with the melting snow water or little canals at the beach? God reached down and stopped the water at Adam just like it was playtime because he is the Living God!

If the Lord is the “living God” it only stands to reason that the gods of the nations that Israel were about to face in battle are “dead gods.” In fact, they were no gods at all! The prophet Jeremiah makes this abundantly clear. He wrote...

**“But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation. Thus shall you say to them: “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.” Jeremiah 10:10-11**

Stopping the Jordan River, parting the Red Sea, sending manna from heaven and water from a rock – these were declarations by the Living God that the God



who commanded his people to move into a new land was the God of all the earth! The earth was his and he could give it to whomever he wished.

Future generations needed to be reminded that God is living and active. Those stones reminded them of that great truth. Our God is alive! **He isn't a philosophy** although his truth invites our most profound reflection. **He isn't a concept**, although his existence demands our most intense consideration. **He isn't a moral force**, although his will establishes our highest ideals. Our God is alive!

Israel was about to enter into a direct conflict with nations who would call on their gods to save them and who would receive no answer because their gods were dead. These conflicts would go on for years ... for centuries, in fact. In fact, they still go on! The conflict between the living God and pretenders to his throne go on today in Olds; it is a battle fought within your hearts and mine to this day!

Rather than worship the true and living God, people choose to turn again and again to gods who are no gods at all. The prophet Elijah met with a host of these people on top of Mount Carmel. They were worshippers of a god they called Baal and Elijah challenged them to a duel of sorts. He said to them...

**“you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.” 1 Kings 18:24**

The followers of Baal built an altar; Elijah built an altar. They laid out offerings to be burnt by fire. The Baal worshippers called and pleaded and begged Baal to answer them with fire but as the writer of Kings put it so eloquently and so succinctly...

**“but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.” 1 Kings 18:29**

Because there was no one home! Baal was a dead god. These people were worshipping something that wasn't even real! Baal was never alive, except in their imaginations. Elijah called on the living God and the living God answered with fire from heaven that consumed the offering and the altar. And the Baal worshippers, watching this display of the living God in action, abandoned their worship of Baal and cried out...

**“The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” 1 Kings 18:39**

But here is the sadness of this whole situation: these people who were worshipping this joke of a god, were children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob! They were some of the very children that Joshua envisioned that day at Gilgal, asking in the future, “what do these stones mean?” They had rejected the living



God and had chosen to give their devotion and their lives to an illusion, a vain imagination, a god of their own creation.

They had not listened to the stones. Are we listening? Are we giving our lives to the living God or to some other god of our imaginations: the god of money, the god of family, the god of religion, the god of science, the god of pleasure, the god of community?

Listen to the stones: we worship the living God!

**Second**, these fathers and mothers could tell their children that...

### **These stones mean that our God keeps all of his promises**

Joshua told the people as they prepared to witness God's miraculous provision that...

**“Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites.”  
Joshua 3:10**

“He will without fail...” You can trust him to do what he says he will do. You can trust him to finish whatever he starts. You can trust him to accomplish his purposes. We can trust him.

In the months and years that lay ahead, God would do exactly as he had promised. As Israel obeyed His Word and followed his commands, God gave them victory after victory. It was only when Israel failed to be obedient that they suffered defeat at the hands of their enemies. At the end of his life, Joshua could look back on the faithfulness of God and could say, without fear of contradiction...

**“you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed.” Joshua 23:14**

“Kids,” these parents could say, “God promised your ancestor Abraham a land for us to live in and look around you – hasn't God kept his promises? Look at this land we live in – God gave it to us. And you know, you can trust him to keep all his promises.”

But these parents could also tell their children that this land that God had given them was his gift to them. God had driven out these seven nations because of their sin and rebellion against him, not because the nation of Israel was better than they were. They could remind their children that they should never take



God's gift for granted and that they should always their lives in grateful obedience to Him for his grace to them. These stones would bring to mind God's warning...

**“And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.”  
Deuteronomy 8:18-19**

God's gifts come to us because he is a promise-keeping God, not because we are worthy of his gifts. God designed these stones to speak a message of grace but sadly sometimes pride kept God's people from hearing the message. We need to listen to the stones: God keeps his promises because he is faithful and gracious.

Listen to the stones: we serve a faithful God!

**Thirdly**, these parents could tell their children that...

**These stones mean that our God has the power to do whatever he says he will do**

Joshua said...

**“When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ ... so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty....” Joshua 4:23, 24**

“Children, do you want to know what these stones mean? They mean that...

**My God is so big, so strong and so mighty  
There's nothing my God cannot do.  
The mountains are His,  
The valleys are His,  
The stars are His handiwork too.  
My God is so big, so strong and so mighty  
There's nothing my God cannot do...  
for you.**

This is stuff that children could understand. Our God is alive. Our God keeps his promises.

Listen to the stones: our God is mighty!



And **fourthly**, these parents could tell their children that...

**These stones mean that our God is always to be obeyed in everything.**

Joshua said...

**“When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ ... that you may fear the LORD your God forever.” Joshua 4:23, 24**

Fearing the Lord isn't about cringing before the Lord. It's about recognizing that he is the Living God and that our lives are to be lived according to his Word. We respect and reverence him as God when we give him the place in our lives that he deserves. He deserves to be obeyed. He deserves to be given the role of commander in our lives.

Years before the people came to the banks of the Jordan River, the Lord had spoken to Moses of his longing for his people. It was at the foot of Mount Sinai. God had given his law to Moses and Moses had relayed the Law of God to the people. In response, the people had promised their complete, lifelong allegiance to God and had committed themselves to obey all of his commands. The Lord heard their words that day but he knew their hearts and he said to Moses...

**“Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!” Deuteronomy 5:29**

Listen to the stones, children. They are calling to you and they say: obey the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all strength and with all your mind!

The twelve stones of Gilgal spoke important truths but **they also asked a question of their own**. I don't know if you noticed that the children's question came in two different versions. I've been focusing on the second version of the question in chapter four, verse 21, “what do these stones mean?” But the stones asked their own question and here it is...

**‘What do those stones mean to you?’ Joshua 4:6**

Joshua, speaking on the Lord's behalf, tells us what the stones mean according to God's perspective. But everyone who knew their story was also cross-examined by them. The stones asked...

**Do you serve the living and true God?  
Do you trust in the God who keeps his promises?  
Do you believe that God is able to do whatever He wills?**



## **Are you living in obedience to the Word of God? What do we mean to you?**

As I thought about these questions two important truths struck me.

**First, as a pastor**, I realized that my primary duty is to point you to the stones, tell you what they mean and tell you what they mean to me. My task is to point you to the stones of Gilgal, the stones of Sinai, the stone call “Ebenezer” that Samuel set up and to the greatest stone of all, to the stone that was rolled away! The Bible records what all these stones mean and what they are to mean to us.

You need to know both what the stones teach about God but you also need to answer the questions that the stones ask. It isn’t enough to merely inform you of God’s truth; I need to press home the question of personal application.

So what about you?

The stones are scattered, but God’s Word remains. You need to know the truth about what God did for his people at the Red Sea, and the Jordan River. You need to know the truth about what God did in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You need to know the truth about these “stones” but you also need to ask yourself the “so what” question: **What do these truths mean to me?**

**Second, as a parent**, I was struck by the fact that the main source of information that our children should have on spiritual matters is not their Sunday school teacher or their youth leader or their pastor – it’s me, their father; it’s my wife, their mother; it’s you, their parents. The writer of Proverbs speaks these wise words ...

**“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.” Proverbs 1:8-9**

Parents, we owe it to our children to be able to answer their questions from our own convictions. It isn’t enough to tell them spiritual information without telling them our own convictions about it. It isn’t good enough to simply inform them and let them make up their own minds. **They need to know the answers to both questions: “what are the spiritual facts?” and “what do the spiritual facts mean to you?”** We owe it to them! And we owe it to God.

So, what about you?

**‘What do those stones mean to you?’**

- **Invitation to prayer ministry**
- **Final Song:** Forever



- **Benediction**

**And now may the living Christ go with us,  
behind us to support us  
beside us to befriend us,  
within us to strengthen us,  
above us to watch over us,  
and ahead of us to show us the way.**

**In the name of the Son,  
By the power of the Spirit,  
To the glory of the Father, Amen.**