

The Memorial Stones

Gleanings from Joshua, Chapter 4



Most of us have enjoyed the spectacular and exciting narratives found in the book of Joshua where the final stage of Israel's long journey from Egypt to Canaan is recorded. We have probably recognised the theme of salvation in every story and have often turned to the book to extract principles of leadership. However, tucked between the blockbuster scripts, lies a quieter, but no less dramatic account of the crossing of a river and a simple memorial service.

After forty years of travelling through the land, their journey about to end, the Israelites face their final challenge: The crossing of the Jordan River. God turns the course of nature on its head just as he had when they crossed the Red Sea, and He performs a miracle again. As He parts the river, making it possible for all to cross safely to the other side, His message to his people is personal and understood. He reminds them that he has always been with them from start to end in every struggle, and that their victory belongs to him.

God does not stop there. He further instructs Joshua to organise a memorial service:

Twelve men, one from each of the tribes of Israel, are sent to the middle of the Jordan River where the priests are waiting with the ark. Each selects a rock and carries it across to Canaan where they will be used to build a memorial.

The purpose of this memorial is to set aside time and space for God's people to remember all that he has done for them; to provide an opportunity for renewing personal commitment and to mark the time when they would no longer suffer the consequence of their past defeats.

Imagine a whole nation reverently engaged in this spiritual act of remembrance. It must have been a poignant and moving service, as one by one the twelve men would have placed their rocks on the designated spot, telling their story of everything they had seen, heard and felt in the difficult years.

God's call to remembrance did not simply recount past victories, but called parents to share their faith with their children (Two references in this chapter remind parents of their responsibility to communicate God's Word and his calling on further generations through the memorial.). It further encouraged the Israelites to be witnesses to the wider community ("that all the peoples of the world may know ...").

The act of renewing personal commitment focuses on Joshua as a leader: As the men carry their stones back to the riverbank, Joshua picks up another twelve stones and builds a memorial in the middle of the riverbed in a personal act of worship and commitment.

When the Israelites reach the other side of the river they set up camp in the place appropriately named Gilgal, which means, “the reproach has been rolled away”. With an overwhelming sense of a journey completed, they finally find freedom from the spiritual defeats and failures of the past forty years. The memorial marks the end of that struggle and they have everything to look forward to - A new beginning in a new land. The Israelites are now a people with a powerful sense of their victory through God.

After the memorial service, the monument of twelve stones would be a continual, visible reminder of God's faithfulness. It would remain a silent witness to the special day when the people of God stepped into the fast flowing Jordan River, confident that He would see them safely to the other side.

And what of us? Where are our memorial stones? Do we take time to remember our unique stories, those monumental occasions when God changed our direction, gave us a new hope and a new sense of purpose? Have our children seen our memorials and asked, “What do these stones mean to you?”

[Anne Pilmoor]