

## In Remembrance

Joshua 4 and 5 (reading 4: 1 – 10)<sup>i</sup>

### You Cannot Cross Jordan Alone

We sang a song last week; one that I truly like—“Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer”—and the final stanza of that song says, “When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside. Death of death, and hell’s Destruction, land me safe on Canaan’s side.” So, “Crossing Jordan” becomes an analogy for death, and “Canaan’s die” for heaven. Another example of the same genre would be “I Won’t Have to Cross Jordan Alone”, with its lyric,

When I come to the river at ending of day,  
when the last winds of sorrow have blown;  
there'll be somebody waiting to show me the way,  
I won't have to cross Jordan alone.<sup>ii</sup>

My impression is that it is a relatively common theme in African/American Spirituals and other gospel songs, and given that to many people the Christian equivalent of “The Promised Land” is heaven, and that the way people ordinarily get there is through death, I get it, and I like the music and understand the analogy. The thing is, Scripture never speaks this way. In fact, when the Scripture speaks of the Jordan at all, it’s always simply as a boundary to be crossed between one piece of real estate and another.

So, the analogy is just a gloss applied to the story to give it a poetic/symbolic meaning that, in the end, may lead us away from what the text actually says, because, as we considered last week, Joshua chapters 3 – 5 tell a story of something that really happened; they are a record of events that took place in time and space history. They are not simply giving us a myth or a fable to which we can apply whatever spiritual meaning we may want.

There was truly a day when Joshua and the people of Israel stood on the east side of the Jordan, and on that day—the day when God commanded them to cross—the river was at flood stage, and running fast, as much as a mile wide. Of course, none of this had escaped the notice the Living God who commanded them to cross—He had arranged it just so, bringing them to the river at a very specific time so that (as we will see in a bit), they would be ready to celebrate the passover for the first time in their new home on exactly the day that God had prescribed in His Law-Word over 40 years before.

So, instead of thinking of the crossing of the Jordan as symbolic of death and entry into the next life, we ought to think of it as the Living God Himself conquering the great obstacle that was preventing His people from entering into the inheritance promised by covenant oath to their father, Abraham. Joshua said:

<sup>11</sup> Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan Joshua 3:11 (ESV)

Not only did they not have to cross Jordan alone; they could not. And just as Joshua, the leader of God’s people, was a type of the Greater Joshua—Jesus Christ our Lord—the Ark, which was merely “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things”<sup>iii</sup> was also a type of something

greater. In the Ark were the stone tablets of the Law, and once a year the High Priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat. This was “the ark of the covenant of the Lord” which went before the people into the promised land. But the writer to the Hebrews said of that Old Covenant:

<sup>8</sup> ...if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.  
Hebrews 4:8 (ESV)

Then, along came the Greater Joshua—Jesus Christ—saying,

<sup>20</sup> ...“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant...” Luke 22:20 (ESV)

but the New Covenant cannot be contained in the Ark, and it cannot be ratified with the blood of bulls or goats. Instead, Jesus said,

<sup>20</sup> ...“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant **in my blood.**” Luke 22:20 (ESV)

So, just as the Old Covenant people of God could not cross Jordan alone, we too cannot “cross Jordan”—we cannot enter into the “Sabbath rest” that God has prepared for us—alone. Rather

<sup>14</sup> ...we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God...  
Hebrews 4:14 (ESV)

and He alone can bring us into the inheritance that God has promised to His people. For,

<sup>15</sup> ...He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance... Hebrews 9:15 (ESV)

Then,

<sup>14</sup> ...let us hold fast our confession Hebrews 4:14 (ESV)

### Of Memories and Monuments

But there are still some things that we can learn from the people of Israel with regard to this because having crossed the Jordan, God did not lead them straight into battle. There were things that had to be done before they faced the walls of Jericho. We read of one in our text this morning. Chapter 4, verses 1 – 3:

<sup>1</sup> When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, <sup>2</sup> “Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, <sup>3</sup> and command them, saying, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests’ feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.’” Joshua 4:1–3 (ESV)

Which, to us, may seem like an odd thing to do, but the stones had a purpose; verse 20

<sup>20</sup> And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. <sup>21</sup> And he said to the people of Israel, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ <sup>22</sup> then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over

this Jordan on dry ground.’<sup>23</sup> 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,<sup>24</sup> **so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.**” Joshua 4:20–24 (ESV)

In other words, for the people who set out to conquer the land, for their children, and for “all the peoples of the earth,” these stones were to be a memorial of the power and glory of the living God displayed in the deliverance of His people—first from Egypt, and then from the wilderness—twelve stones from the middle of the River; one for each of the twelve tribes—as a memorial forever of the Covenant-keeping God.

But there was more. Joshua 5, verses 2 and 3:

**<sup>2</sup> At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.” <sup>3</sup> So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth.** Joshua 5:2–3 (ESV)

which less delicate scholars translate as “the hill of the foreskins” (which, I don’t think, is on the usual tours of the Holy Land). See, for whatever reason (we can only speculate), “the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised...”<sup>iv</sup>—they had not received the sign and seal<sup>v</sup> of God’s covenant with their father Abraham. But now they did. The “whole nation”, every male from 8 days to 40 years old, received the Old Covenant sign of circumcision—the literal “putting off the body of the flesh”<sup>vi</sup>—and only when they were healed did the Lord say to Joshua:

**<sup>9</sup> ...“Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” And so the name of that place is called Gilgal [which sounds like the Hebrew for “to roll”] to this day.** Joshua 5:9 (ESV)

Then, having been circumcised,

**<sup>10</sup> While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho.** Joshua 5:10 (ESV)

which, as I mentioned earlier, was exactly the time which God had commanded it be eaten. After 40 years of leading them through the wilderness, God not only brought them into the land as He had promised long before, He brought them in at exactly the time required so that when the “reproach of Egypt” had finally been rolled away, they could slay the Passover lambs, and eat the covenant meal of the Lord their God, remembering that everything had unfolded in this way by the power, the glory, and the faithfulness of the Living God.

Speaking especially of the stones, but the idea applies to all three of these memorials, James Montgomery Boice wrote:

**The people needed a memorial because, like ourselves, they tended to forget the goodness and mighty acts of God on their behalf.**<sup>vii</sup>

## **Remember and Believe**

I think this tendency to forget God’s goodness and mighty acts is similar what the author of

our Belgic Confession was speaking about when he wrote:

We believe that our good God, **mindful of our crudeness and weakness**, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith.

He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.<sup>viii</sup>

In other words, just as God gave memorials of His power and goodness to the people of Israel, He has given us memorials—signs and seals—of the New Covenant in Christ so that we will always remember and believe that “by the blood of Jesus”, the mediator of this new and better covenant,

<sup>19</sup> ...we have confidence to enter the holy places... <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh... Hebrews 10:19–20 (ESV)

As the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth went down into the Jordan to make a way into the promised land for Israel, even so Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was crucified, went down into the grave, and then rose, victorious over death and hell, to (as the carol reminds us), “Make safe for us the heavenward road and bar the way to death’s abode”.<sup>ix</sup>

We remember this in the sacrament of holy communion, the New Covenant Passover, when we partake by faith, remembering and believing that the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ was given for the complete forgiveness of all of our sins. This is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant Passover—the substance of which that meal was only a shadow.

We also remember in Baptism—what the Apostle Paul refers to as

<sup>11</sup> ...a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11–12 (ESV)

As we confess:

Having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, he established in its place the sacrament of baptism.

By it we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions, that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign.

### Living Stones

And finally the stones—twelve stones, one for each of the twelve tribes that God in His faithfulness had brought through the Jordan and into the promised land. Now, I can't be dogmatic about this but in 1st Corinthians 10 we're told that our fathers,

<sup>3</sup> ...all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank

from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>1</sup> Corinthians 10:3–4 (ESV)

This was, is, and always will be so. Christ is

<sup>4</sup> ...a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious... <sup>1</sup> Peter 2:4 (ESV)

wrote Peter, but with the very next stroke of his pen he said,

<sup>5</sup> ...you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>1</sup> Peter 2:5 (ESV)

So, we don't need cairns anymore. We don't need altars and monuments to make us remember the goodness and power of our God. We who by faith have been brought from darkness to light, we are "living stones". We are the memorial. We need not look to a cairn by the river or even the cross on the wall, we have only to look to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to His Spirit who

<sup>16</sup> ...himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>Romans 8:16–17</sup> (ESV)

See, ultimately, the sacraments and memorials of the Old Covenant were like memorials in advance—signs looking ahead and leading down the long road to Jesus Christ, the true Son and seed of Abraham. And the sacraments of the New Covenant are there to make sure that we, who have come to Him by faith, never forget that salvation and deliverance are only by the grace of our good God, given to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. When we remember this—when we truly believe this—then in Him, we are "living stones", part of a

<sup>9</sup> ...chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession... <sup>1</sup> Peter 2:9 (ESV)

and then, like that heap of stones beside the Jordan, put there all those years ago

<sup>24</sup> so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty... <sup>Joshua 4:20–24</sup> (ESV)

we too

...may proclaim the excellencies of him who called **[us]** out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>1</sup> Peter 2:9 (ESV)

So, once again, as we have been saying with the lighting of the candle week by week through this Advent season, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

---

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii <https://genius.com/Skeeter-davis-i-wont-have-to-cross-jordan-alone-lyrics>

iii Cf. Hebrews 8: 5.

iv Cf. Joshua 5: 5.

v Cf. Romans 4:11.

vi Cf. Colossians 2: 11.

vii James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 39.

viii Christian Reformed Church, *Belgic Confession* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1985), Art. 33.

---

ix Christian Reformed Church, *Psalter Hymnal*, "O Come, O Come Immanuel" Stanza 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), 328.