

### Stones in the River Joshua 4:1-7

- I. Let me start out with a question this morning. How many here like to walk around historical areas? Now I am not talking as much about places like Old Salem with shops and bakeries where you can get apple spiced cake or Moravian chicken pie, but more like Guilford County Courthouse over in Greensboro where all you see are some old cannons and barren battlefields. Now if you enjoy this, put your hand up. Any of our ladies? Okay, I don't mean to be sexist here but in my experience most women generally don't care about these kinds of historical sites. I should say at least the ladies in my family don't. Several years ago, we were up in Pennsylvania visiting my wife's family when we had the opportunity to tour Valley Forge. Now just to clarify for the non-history buffs, Valley Forge is not a mall or an amusement park but rather the site George Washington chose to camp during the winter of 1777-78 during the Revolutionary War (**image**). More soldiers died here from the freezing weather and disease than died in most of the battles fought during the rest of the war. I, being a history nerd, was quite elated. Megan, my wife, not being a history nerd, looked like she just swallowed a pile of prunes. She said something to the effect of, "Why would we want to go look at a pile of old rocks?" And my response was something like, "Because something important happened here." Now being the patriarch of the family, the top dog, the one and only man, the one who wears the pants ... we ended up going to a nearby town looking at shops and eating apple spice cake.
  
- II. So why do some of us enjoy looking at a pile of rocks or old battlefields? A year ago my brother purchased a DNA test to determine our family's ancestry. It turns out we are originally from Africa. Kidding. No. No surprise... Irish/Scottish with a dose of Viking blood thrown in. Where I get my red beard, I suppose. But looking back at the family tree or a country's history can tell us in a sense who we are and maybe point us where we are going. This is true not only as a country or a family but also as a church. Let's read **Joshua 4:1-7 NIV**. Let me give the background. Moses, of the Ten Commandments and long beard fame, led the Israelites to the edge of the Promised Land and then dies after a long-winded speech. His sermons were even longer than mine. Joshua, a man of great faith and courage, takes up the reigns and leads them to the Jordan River. (**image**) This is the point of no return. It is the Israelites' Rubicon. If they cross this river, the literal line in the sand, they will be stepping into enemy territory. The land of the Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites and so forth, all war-like tribes who didn't take kindly to strangers trying to crash on their turf. But by crossing the Jordan River they were also entering into the illustrious Promised Land given to them by God. But there is an immediate problem. Like the old Sunday School song goes, the river is deep and wide.... at least the Jordan was during flood stage, which it was then (**image**). But God commands Joshua to take the Ark of the Covenant which holds what? All the W-2 and I-9 forms the Israelites had accumulated during their employment in Egypt, right? No, the Ten Commandments. He commands the priests, the only ones who were allowed to touch the ark, to carry it across the river. Now it is important for us to understand that the Ark of the Covenant was not just some fancy document container but rather was understood to be the seat or throne of God. (**image**) To them it represented the very essence or presence of the Lord. Now these apparently buff

priests took a step into the water, and miraculously the river converted to a desert...and the entire nation of Israel began to cross.

- III. For us bible scholars this should remind us of a different event. When Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness with the entire Egyptian Army on their tail. It is interesting that the Exodus story begins and ends with a crossing of water, a geographical boundary with spiritual implications. In both cases, **they were stepping into unknown and uncharted territory where they were forced to put their present and future in God's hands.** And to remember this incredible event, this miraculous moment, God tells Joshua to command twelve men to place river stones on the other side...creating a monument... one stone for each tribe of Israel. And why did God demand this? For aesthetics? Ambience? Create a river rock outdoor fire pit? No. The bible tells us in verse 6, **"When your children ask in the future why these stones are here, you can tell them the waters were cut off in front of Ark of the Covenant."** In other words, you tell them something significant happened here. God showed up and you best not to forget it.
- IV. Just like the Israelites, we need those reminders in our lives too. In order for us to know really who we are and where we are going, we need to remember where we have been. This is as true for us Americans with our unique and rich heritage as it was for the Israelites during Joshua's time. It is also true for us at G3. We need to remember who we are, where we come from and where we are going. **We need to recall those moments when God showed up in the life of our community. These become our stones, our rocks, our reminders that God has moved and is still on the move.** And these stones are not just events; often they are people who God has used to accomplish His will and impact our lives. In a sense, living stones.
- V. So we need to remember a small little guy by the name of John Wesley (**image**) who God used in the 1700's to turn the nation of England upside down. God used Wesley to bring about spiritual revival in England, which, among many things, brought slavery to its knees. John is one of our stones as he founded the United Methodist Church of which we are part. We remember a guy named Francis. Francis Asbury (**image**), a United Methodist church planter who traveled over 130,000 miles on horseback, began hundreds of new faith communities in the early days of our country and preached over 10,000 sermons...and consequently put to sleep estimated 1 million people in his time. 😊 But Francis is one of our stones, a living stone... a reminder of God showing up in a mighty way. He is one of our spiritual church-planting ancestors. We need to remember another fellow by the name of John Alspaugh (**image**) who began a bible study near a muddy creek a couple of miles from here. Soon a regular worship service started...and in 1845 under nothing more than a few trees and bushes for cover Mt. Tabor United Methodist Church, our mother church, was born. John Alspaugh too is one of our stones...a living reminder of how God showed up.
- VI. But let me talk to you about something a little more recent. Around 7 years ago twelve men and women began meeting in a living room of a house. God gave us a common vision. A vision to reach those many of our churches were missing. Those who were hurt by the church, those who the church hurt. The addicted as well as

those who thought they had it altogether. We had a vision to be a church for all people not just certain types of people. People of all colors, races, backgrounds, rich, poor and somewhere in between. Families as well as the singles. Soon 12 became 24. **(pics)** We began doing what we called bridge events to bridge out to the community. And we generally had a great deal of fun doing them. Generally. I remember one bridge event where we were giving away Christmas trees a few weeks before Christmas. Sounded good on paper but no matter what we did, no one wanted one! I think people might have thought we were a cult and we implanted cameras in the tree or something. But most of our events went well. We even collected some new people along the way. And sometime before we launched we read the same Scripture we read this morning at one of our home worship services. I asked the question, "What are the stones that we want to remember so when one day we look back, we can recall what God has done?" Most of them were people that God had called into our mission. Let me read a few this morning. **(stones)** But there were others too. Location. Church approval. Finances. G3 began with a handful of people meeting in a house with only a God-given dream. Twelve people were willing to cross our own Jordan into the unknown. Now look around at what He has done. God showed up big time. We best not forget it.

- VII. Some of you know that last week I went down to Florida for a church planter's conference. Unfortunately, most of my tan is gone ☺. It's the largest of its kind in the world. Where thousands of us pastor types get together and hear from some of the most gifted in our field. In break-out sessions you can learn about anything from how to manage church finances to the latest automated church software, or how to improve your preaching. No comments please! I can't tell you how many times I have been and I always learn something new. But can I be honest with you this morning? Seriously? When I left to head down, I was not in a good place. For a lack of a better expression I felt burned out. Please know I love what I do but when you never have a break I have learned you can begin to hate what you love. And I was at that point when I got in my car to head south. I confess when I was heading for the conference I cared less about learning anything new than to simply get away from the never ending church "to do list." There was always one more email to send, one more phone call to make, one more visit to do, one more meeting to attend, one more sermon to prepare, and the list went on. And my spiritual walk was tanking. So while I attended the conference daily, I went begrudgingly...waiting for the session to be over so I could go back and sit by the pool, work on my sunburn and read a book minus my electronic umbilical cord to the outside world (cell phone). Then it hit me. It was the very last session. A very well known Church Planter by the name of Francis Chan spoke. Unlike the other speakers, he wasn't giving us a "motivational" or "how to" talk...like 3 easy steps on how to grow your church. He got up there and simply admitted he had gotten it all wrong. He went on to explain that until recently he thought church planting was just about gathering the largest number of people as possible in a building on a Sunday morning and preaching the bible to them. But he said that is all wrong. Church planting and worship in general is about helping usher people into the presence of God. We pastor and worship leaders simply function as the conduit to help make this happen. Now I don't remember much more than this. Because God spoke to me at this point of his message. Now if you know me, I rarely use the "God spoke to me" phrase

because I am a cynic...and this is way overused in the Christian world and I often doubt it's God as much as what the person wants to hear. But that is the only way I can explain it on that day. I clearly heard in my heart or mind, "Ron, you have lost your first love." A quote from Jesus from the book of Revelation 2:4. I felt that God was telling me I lost my love for Jesus. (If you don't believe me, I don't hold it against you. I am not sure I would believe it myself if the tables were turned. But I believe I did hear from God that day.) And the next thing I know, Francis Chan is asking us pastors to come to stage if you wanted prayer. I did. I was one of the first ones to go...practically knocking down an elderly guy and his wife to get there. Soon I was joined my hundreds. Before I knew it I was embraced by this complete stranger who reminded me so much of our drummer Warren. I immediately liked him. I told him just like I told you what I felt God said, and he anointed me with oil and started praying for me like I have never been prayed for before. I felt this overwhelming love, peace and forgiveness sweep over me as he prayed; and as hard as it is for my male ego to admit, I found myself sobbing like a child in this stranger's arms. And for a moment, this man I had never met before in my life and will probably never meet again, was the hands, arms and feet of Jesus to me. The bitterness I was holding onto, my frustration for working long hours, my exhaustion and the cold heart I had developed just melted away. I realized I allowed my love and my work for G3 to displace my first love, my love of Jesus. In G3 parlance I was coming back home to our heavenly Father once again.

- VIII. At this point you very well might be thinking, "That's nice Ron and thank you for that very long personal story. But how does this have anything to do with Joshua, the Jordan, G3, God, and the stones." My response is it has everything to do with it. The reason we look back today at what God has done in the life of G3...the reason we stepped out across our own Jordan not too many years ago...is to see people who feel far from God come home. To come and experience the goodness, the grace, the forgiveness of His love for the very first time or, like in my case, for the 100,000 time. We look at the "stones" of our faith community to remind us what God is going to do in the future. To help even more to come home to our loving, heavenly Father's embrace. So in the end these are not just a pile of stones, but living reminders of what God has done. And better yet they point to what God is going to do in the years to come. So, are you ready to cross our next Jordan? Become our own church so we, by God's grace, can help even more to come home. Let's step out in boldness, in courage and in faith, knowing we don't go alone.