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Witnessing

Lesson Aim: To observe that God has emphasized by word and type the importance of witnessing of Him and His works from one generation to the next.

L2. Text: Joshua 4:1-7, 19-24. **Date:** April 1959. **Topic:** Witnessing

After Moses death, Joshua assumed the leadership of the nation of Israel. The nation had been camped on the east side of the Jordan River. Now they must cross over the river to begin the conquest of the land of Canaan (Palestine, or the Promised Land) by an attack on the city of Jericho. The matter was not quite this simple, however, as the Jordan River was in a flood stage and greatly overflowed its banks. The first question facing Joshua was how to get the people across the swollen river. Now under the command of God, the word is passed through the camp of Israel that they were to follow the Ark of the Covenant (the oblong box kept in the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle), leaving a space of about 3,000 feet between them and it. Chapter Three of the book of Joshua tells how, when the feet of the priest who were carrying the Ark had touched the water, the river suddenly dried up. The priests walked on down into the bed of the river and stood there until the nation had all passed over safely. (Of course, some of the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh stayed east of the Jordan.) Stones were then taken from the river bed to be used to build a memorial on the west bank of the Jordan. This is the subject of today's lesson.

This lesson bears witness to several facts. (1) It points out the power of faith when it is centered in God—such faith made the people march into an overflowing river believing God would provide for them. (2) It points to the power of God over nature in causing the river to stop flowing. (3) It points to the importance of caring for the spiritual interests of our descendants. (4) It points up God's faithfulness in caring for His own, showing that His purposes do not fail when human ability reaches its end.

I. God's People Should Have Memorials to Witness of Past Blessings, 4:1-7.

It is to be observed that the erection of this memorial was suggested by the Lord. The purpose of the memorial was that it may serve as a witness to the people then living and to the generations who followed them. In the New Testament, Jesus set up the use of baptism and the memorial meal (Lord's Supper) to bear witness to His death and resurrection and our salvation accomplished therein. Memorials and various religious symbols (such as the cross) are good and profitable so long as they retain their original purpose—to bear witness to the person and work of God. However, when they lose their sacred purpose and become an end in themselves, they are useless and harmful. The observance of special seasons of remembrance of the birth of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, etc., is good so long as the spiritual significance is retained. When it becomes a season devoted to other things it is profitless to man's religious welfare. Let us study the purpose of the memorial set up by Israel that we may determine the proper use of memorials of witness in the present Christian tradition.

1. Religious memorials are to remind of God's work, not men's. There can be no question but that the stopping of the waters of the Jordan River was the work of God. There was nothing about the priest's feet which stopped the water when they stepped into the edge of it. There was no magical power in the Ark of the Covenant which performed this miracle. Joshua, or any other man in Israel, was helpless to control the raging flood of the overflowing Jordan. The melting snows of Mount Lebanon had set the waters to rushing down the Jordan Valley. A man had as well try to stop the wind of a raging storm as to try to stop this torrent of water.

Perhaps one thing that makes many of the present day religious memorials lose their significance is that we allow men too large a place in them. At Christmas, for instance, many people become so entranced with giving and receiving gifts that they forget that the period is to have special religious significance. In order for any religious memorial to serve its intended purpose, God must be kept at the center of it and its result must be to draw us closer to and make us more mindful of Him.

2. Religious memorials are to be observed by all the people, verses 1-5. Before this crossing of the river, twelve men had been chosen from the nation. One man was taken from each tribe, so that the representatives of the entire nation were involved in the transporting of these stones. Not only did the memorial constructed by these stone witness to the miracle of the crossing of the Jordan, it also witnessed to the unity of the nation. One

memorial composed of twelve stones tells that each of the twelve tribes was grateful to God for the deliverance accomplished. Thus, the entire nation had a part in erecting the memorial and in witnessing to the coming generation concerning the faithfulness of their God.

Think of what a revival would be stirred in the hearts of Americans if each one who calls himself a Christian could observe the Christian memorials (baptism and the Lord's Supper) in their true meaning! What a difference it would make in many half-hearted church members. How it would awaken the indifferent, strengthen the weak, encourage the despondent, comfort the sorrowing, convict the sinning, and convert the erring, if only each person could see the full significance in the memorials of the sufferings of Christ and our redemption thereby! How can one be a true Christian and ignore the sacred memorials which Jesus has commanded him to observe? How can one be truly devoted to the Lord and neglect these memorials which are to be a witness until He returns? Religious memorials are useless unless they are able to accomplish their desired purpose of inspiring dedication and sustaining communion with the Lord Jesus. How long has it been since you observed the ordinances with your church? Wouldn't an observance of them, with a real searching of soul, be a fine beginning for revival in your heart? Try it!

3. Religious memorials are to be used as an aid to teaching, verses 6-7. Perhaps one of the most effective types of teaching is through the use of visual aids. It is this that the Lord intended the memorial of stones from the Jordan to serve. The Lord instructs Joshua that the purpose of the stone memorial was to be a "sign" which would arouse questions and permit the teaching of future generations about the miracle of the crossing of the Jordan. Standing as a proof of the reliability of the written record of this event, the stone memorial would be an excellent opportunity for witnessing. This same design is seen in the New Testament when Jesus had caused (by Holy Spirit inspiration) the full record of His sufferings and death to be written, but has yet given us the visible symbols of the Lord's Supper to remember them also. This monument which Joshua built would have no inscription upon it, but it will continually remind Israel of the work of God and will be a continual reproof to the gods of the heathen nations around. Naturally such an odd heap of uncut stones would arouse the curiosity of the children who would ask, "What are these stones for?" The adults then could recount the story of God cutting off the waters of the Jordan when Israel came to pass across. The picture implanted on the mind's eye by the pile of stones (each about the size which one man could carry) and the explanation of the story of the crossing would be indelibly stamped upon an

impressionable child. (This is the same teaching methods used in most churches and schools. We see here that God used it first, however.)

4. Religious memorials are to be preserved for the sake of posterity, verse 7b. These stones were to serve as a witness “*forever.*” By this the Scriptures mean that for generations to come these stones would serve to remind Israel of their wonderful demonstration of the power of God. The “forever” does not mean “eternally,” of course, for there is no need for them to bear an eternal witness. It rather has the meaning of “from age to age” and refers to succeeding generations. It is to be seriously questioned if this pile of stones could be even remotely identified today.

The main idea in the preservation of this memorial is that present generations should contribute to the spiritual life of future generations. The accumulating record of the workings of God and His revelation of Himself should give to each generation a greater religious heritage than the preceding generation had. Thus men may grow in their knowledge of God and are more and more qualified to serve Him. Our own generation has partly failed in its task unless it can leave a stepping stone so the next can go higher and further in spiritual things. We have our own memorials to be preserved in purity for the sake of those who follow us. Are your children inheriting a rich religious heritage?

II. Religious Memorials Will Witness to Coming Generations, 4:19-24.

1. Religious memorials witness of God-given victories, verses 19-20. Israel entered the Land of Promise on “*the tenth day of the first month.*” This was just forty years, lacking five days, after their departure from Egypt. It was the day when the paschal Lamb was to be set apart for the feast of the Passover, Exodus 12:3. Perhaps as they entered the land with this solemn and sacred season upon them, their minds turned back to all the victories they had won since leaving the Egyptian bondage. This pile of stones, which became a memorial of crossing the Jordan, was a witness to all these God given victories. They had marched through the Red Sea with a wall of water on each side, had bitter water made sweet at Marah, had received water from a rock in Horeb, had received the Law from God on Mount Sinai, had been given the remedy for the bite of the fiery serpents, had been protected from the evil intended by Balaam, and finally had been brought safely across the flooding Jordan River. This last great event was only one of many victories which God gave them over nature, serpents, and men. As the wilderness journey had begun with a passage through the water, so it ended the same way. God is sufficient all the time.

The Christian rejoices in the memorials of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which witness to the truth of Jesus' sufferings and our salvation through Him. Again, the victory which Jesus gained and that victory which we gain through Him is of God. The resurrection, ascension, and redemption accomplished thereby are all the work of God. It was not Jesus as a man, but Jesus as God, who took up again that life He had laid down. The Christian may well remember that any good which is accomplished through his efforts should bring no praise to himself, because "*it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,*" Philippians 2:13.

2. Religious memorials witness by arousing curiosity, verse 21. The inquisitiveness of children affords an excellent opportunity to parents to acquaint them with the wonderful works of God and to train them in His fear. Rather than these questions being a bother, they are a God-given opportunity for spiritual instruction.

This writer remembers the opportunity of explaining to my young son the significance of the Lord's Supper and why children could not partake of it with church members. It was a unique opportunity to be used of the Holy Spirit in leading him to a consciousness of sin and the necessity for salvation. Never should the ordinances of the church be looked upon lightly, nor children's questions concerning them be dismissed as immature. In fact, much of the potential value of these ordinances are lost unless they are used as aids for the instruction of the younger generation. Deep respect for these ordinances and loyalty to the preservation of their teachings and mode of administration is essential for a pure doctrinal church in the coming years. Parents and workers with children should take care to teach properly along this line.

3. Religious memorials witness by preserving historical facts, verse 22. As important as it is to gain the spiritual lessons from religious memorials, it is also important for us to remember that the Christian memorials represent actual historic incidents. Just as surely as Israel actually crossed the Jordan, so our Lord Jesus lived, died, was buried and arose again. One so-called "Christian cult" in America contends "Jesus hid in the grave three days and nights to prove the triumph of mind over matter." God forbid! His death was a reality or we are without hope in Him as Savior. We agree with Clement of Rome who wrote, "Jesus *truly* died, was *truly* buried, and *truly* arose again from the dead." There was no hoax nor element of deceit about it. He is our Savior and Redeemer because of this grand exhibition of the grace of God. Without His sacrifice we have no hope. Never must we allow the historic fact of the ministry and suffering of Jesus to be forgotten. Little could the future generations in Israel forget that God

had given them passage across the flooding Jordan River, because the stone memorial was there to remind them. Little can we afford to let the true witness of the Christian memorials fade into the background. If they are without historicity, they are without real spiritual meaning to those who observe them.

4. Religious memorials witness to God's work in human affairs, verse 23. It is almost beyond our admission that a God of majesty, infinity, glory, holiness, and power could condescend to deal in the affairs of sinful men. Especially, it is strange that He should select a group of people who are bond-slaves to a powerful nation. However, it is true that God is concerned with the affairs of men—all men. It is He who causes nations to arise and fall. It is He who rewards righteousness and punishes sin in every person. It is He who is working out a purpose in human history. It is He who will receive the honor of having all things work to His ultimate glory, in spite of sin and the rebellion of sinful men.

It is incorrect for us to see God as being away off up in heaven where He observes us from a distance. The Scriptures rather say that He is here upon the earth, indwelling each of His children. See I Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22. He knows our words, works, and intentions. Psalm 139:1-12. He guides us in service, strengthens us in trial, affords us victory in battle, and otherwise works in our daily experience. Just as surely as He directed Moses and Israel through the wilderness, so He is vitally concerned with our situation today. Never must God be divorced from men's work in government, economics, society, home, or religion. He is interested and active in the affairs of all men.

5. Religious memorials are to be a witness to all men, verse 24a. It was difficult for Israel to overcome their narrow nationalism in later years. They considered they had an exclusive right to God and were little interested in sharing this message with others. Prophets such as Isaiah told how God would be known by all men over the world. This is His grand purpose! *"That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty,"* is the grand purpose of all revelation. No one nation has a monopoly upon God. God intends all men to hear the Gospel message and has so commissioned His church that it would perform that kind of universal ministry, Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8. It matters not the age nor geographical location where one lives, every man is created in the image of God and has an unquestionable right to know God. It is the business of the redeemed to carry that message.

CONCLUSION: Religious memorials are never an end in themselves. They are intended to lead us to something better and greater than what we now have. If properly observed, they will qualify us for trials to come.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the events accompanying the crossing of the Jordan River.
2. List some of the truths to which this lesson bears witness.
3. Who suggested that this memorial of stones be built? Why?
4. How can religious memorials be an aid to teaching?
5. For whose sake was the memorial of stones built?
6. Does God really work in human history? Give examples.
7. What are the Christian memorials? To what does each witness?
8. Give three lessons you gained from this study which will make you a better Christian.