

Joshua 4:1–24 — What Mean Ye by These Stones?

Two Sets of Twelve Stones, Death and Resurrection with Christ, and the Decisive Passage

Scripture Reading: Joshua 4:1–24

“And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over Jordan, that the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying, Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, and command them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan... twelve stones, and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night.

That this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean ye by these stones? Then ye shall answer them, That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD... and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever.

And those twelve stones, which they took out of Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal. And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? Then ye shall let your children know, saying, On dry ground did Israel come over this Jordan... that all the people of the earth might know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the LORD your God for ever.”

All the People Were Clean Passed Over

Chapter 4 opens with a completed fact: all the people were clean passed over Jordan. Not most. Not the faithful ones. All. God's view of the matter is that the company he had in mind — the whole twelve-tribed nation — passed over completely. This is how he looks at it. The realization of it, the practical entering into what it means, is another matter. But God's viewpoint is settled and it is this: all clean passed over. The church that answers to this, from Pentecost to the rapture, is equally a complete company before God. Not one will be left behind. Resurrection and rapture are entirely of grace, not of reward or merit. God has formed the company and the company is complete.

Two Sets of Twelve Stones: Both Witness to the Same Thing

The twelve stones are of peculiar interest because there were two sets of them, not one. Twelve stones were taken from the bed of the Jordan and carried to Gilgal where the camp was. And twelve stones were set up by Joshua in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the priests' feet had stood, and they are there to this day — covered by the river, invisible, but real.

The stones in the river floor and the stones at Gilgal both witness to the same transaction: Israel passed through Jordan. One set is visible to all who go to Gilgal; the other is hidden under the river. Both are equally true evidence of what happened. This recalls Jeremiah's purchase of the field at Anathoth during the siege of Jerusalem, where there were two copies of the deed — one open and one sealed. Both witnessed to the same reality. So the twelve stones in the river testify to Israel's passage just as truly as those at Gilgal, even though no one can see them. God knows. The testimony is there whether visible to men or not.

What Mean Ye by These Stones? The Truth of Death and Resurrection with Christ

The purpose of the Gilgal stones was explicitly to provoke a question: when your children ask, What mean ye by these stones? — you shall have an answer. Christians hear much about What mean ye by this service? in connection with the Passover. Less is heard about What mean ye by these stones? Yet both questions are there, and both demand an answer.

The Passover answers to the Red Sea — Christ's death and resurrection for us. The twelve stones at Gilgal answer to the Jordan — our death and resurrection with Christ. These are distinct, though inseparable. In Romans we get one side: we are dead to sin through Christ's death. In Colossians we get another: in him also ye are circumcised with the circumcision of Christ, the entire putting off of the body of the flesh. The whole thing removed — not piece by piece but altogether, the whole first man gone from before God. And then: buried with him in baptism, raised with him through faith. In Ephesians: seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. All of these are aspects of one great work, all true simultaneously for the believer, though developed separately in the word of God.

Baptism points to this. Once it is understood that baptism speaks of death — not of life — all these questions open up: death to what? What does it mean to have the first man removed from before God? What is my place now? These are the questions that are brought to bear. If baptism is presented only as a sign of life or of salvation, the whole subject of our death and resurrection with Christ is bypassed. The stones at Gilgal say something about death: they came from the place where the ark stood in the midst of death, and they were carried out on the other side. That is the sign. The children should ask. The parents should be able to answer.

Canaan Is Not Heaven: The Jordan Is Not Death to Glory

Many Christians have been taught, and many hymns reflect the idea, that crossing the Jordan represents death and reaching Canaan's happy shore

represents heaven. This is mistaken, and the content of the book of Joshua shows it immediately: Canaan was a land of battles, conflict, the weeping at Bochim, Achan's sin, difficult campaigns. These things do not answer to the rest of glory.

The Jordan answers to our death and resurrection with Christ. Canaan answers to the heavenlies in Ephesians — the spiritual inheritance of the believer — which is a scene not of rest but of conflict with principalities and powers, requiring the whole armour of God. Ephesians 6 follows Ephesians 1–3. We are seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus, and yet there are spiritual forces opposed to our taking possession of what is ours. The title is complete; the possession requires fighting. This was brought out through J.N. Darby as to the meaning of the types. We have nothing to boast about in knowing it — it was the grace of God by the movement of the Spirit that opened these things from his word.

Clean Passed Over: A Decisive Thing

The language of the chapter is decisive: clean passed over. Not a foot still on the far bank, not a long rope still attached to a tent peg back in the plains of Moab. The two and a half tribes who chose to remain on the other side of the Jordan represent a refusal to be heavenly — and in Israel it was a small portion that refused; in Christendom, the proportion is reversed, and it is the great mass that does not want to enter into what Canaan signifies. But the type is clear: God's view of his people is that they are clean passed over, all twelve tribes, all twelve stones out on the other side.

After the victories in Canaan, Israel returned to Gilgal. The memorial stones were there. Every return to that camp brought them back to the memorial of what they had passed through. Circumcision was there, the putting off of the flesh in Colossians 2. The Passover on the 14th day, the old corn of the land on the 15th, the feast of unleavened bread. Gilgal was the base from which all the conquests went out, and to which the people returned. For the believer, Gilgal — the

realization of death and resurrection with Christ, the cutting off of the first man — is the ground from which all spiritual warfare proceeds and to which the soul returns to be renewed in its apprehension of where it stands before God.

There is only one measure before God, and that measure is Christ. However fragmented the visible state of the people of God may be in practice, God does not reckon it that way. In the twelve stones at Gilgal, the twelve loaves of shewbread on the table, the twelve men drawn one from every tribe — the whole nation is always in view. As Paul said before Agrippa, our twelve tribes serve God day and night. Ten had been lost for centuries. But in the mind of God there are still twelve. He will make it good under Christ when he is priest upon his throne.

What mean ye by these stones? On dry ground did Israel come over this Jordan — that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is mighty.