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Joshua 4:1-9

“What do these stones mean?”

Praise be to the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

All around the world you can find broken piles of stones from once impressive buildings, some of them made thousands of years before Jesus' birth. But in many cases, no one today can say for sure what those buildings were originally for, whether temples, palaces or fortresses. If God should let this world go on long enough, no doubt one day the same will be true of many of today's famous buildings, they

will be just ruined stones that no one really remembers.

So consider how amazing it is our first reading speaks of a rather small pile of **twelve stones** set up by the Israelites some 3,400 years ago! Though those stones no longer stand today, yet their meaning is not forgotten, because the Holy Spirit recorded it in His Word. Even if this world lasts a thousand years or more, the stones **Joshua** set up will *still* be speaking to God's people through the pages of the Bible, for the Son of God has promised: **My words will never pass away!**

So let's learn what the Holy Spirit still wants to teach us from this ancient **stone memorial** by answering the question in our reading: **What do these stones mean?**

To answer that, we need to know the background. **The whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan.** As a result, God's Old Testament people, Israel, now stood in Canaan, the land God promised to their ancestor

Abraham over 500 years before. During all those long centuries Israel was in Egypt, God gave the people of Canaan time to turn from their evil and unbelief. But now God was sending them a judgment day in the form of the Israelites led by Joshua, who would conquer the land.

But there's more to the book of Joshua than war and conquest. This was all part of God keeping His promise to send the world a Savior. You see, the promise of Israel taking possession of the promised-land of Canaan was connected to His promise to send the Savior of the Nation's from Abraham's family, a Savior who would be born in that land, in Bethlehem.

Entering Canaan, the Israelites would now face two dangerous spiritual traps. The first would be fear and despair, as the Israelites faced powerful enemies who had better weapons and great fortress cities. Dangerous enemies who were determined to stubbornly fight God's people to the bitter end. Would Israel once

again doubt God's ability to help and save them as they had done so often before?

But then as God gave them victories and blessings on every side, Israel would face another spiritual pitfall: the temptation to pride that would think that their own power and strength was the reason for their victories.

Pride thinks it's all about me and what I've done. Fearful despair that sees danger and difficulty and wrongly concludes: God must not care about me. Do you see what these sins have in common? They both forget to rely on the Lord through His promises. They both come from trusting someone or something other than the Lord. And you and I have been guilty of both.

Things go well for us and we easily start to think it must be because we've got things all figured out. It must be because of all our sacrifice, hard work and accomplishment. And in so forgetting the Lord our thanks to him in

our prayers and in our living soon becomes shallow.

But then troubles come into our life, and how easily we start to question or blame God, whether it's out loud or in the grumbling and worry of our hearts. Maybe we see all the threats to Church, the growing unbelief and hostility in our world and we wring our hands as though Jesus never fore-warned us we could expect just such things.

Some days we even go back and forth, from one to the other, from pride to despair, from worry to self-reliance. And all this sin means God's punishment should come crashing down on us like a raging flood sweeping us into death and hell.

But God in His amazing love gave the Israelites, and still gives you and me an antidote to the twin dangers of pride and despair. **"Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according**

to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you.

Wait. Just *where* did the stones for this **memorial sign** come from? **The middle of the Jordan.** The middle of a river. The middle of a river that earlier that day was flooding its banks, in a spring rain swollen torrent of rushing water. A river that blocked Israel's path into the promised land of Canaan. There was no way the nation, including little children and the elderly could ever safely cross this flood stage river.

But God had a way. He sent the priests into the river, the priests carrying **the ark of the covenant**, that special golden chest that stood for God being present with His people to keep His promises. And when priests' toes hit water, **the waters of the Jordan were cut off.** God caused the raging river to stop flowing several miles upstream. Now the priests with the ark could stand in the middle of the Jordan, now the whole nation could cross into Canaan on a highway several miles long where a raging river

used to be. Oh and this river crossing wasn't on soupy mud or slippery wet stones, but on miraculous dry ground!

That's when God ordered twelve men to pick up those "souvenir" stones from the **middle of the Jordan** so the Israelites could remember how God stepped in to prove that nothing, not even a raging river could stop Him doing what He promised His Church.

So **What do these stones mean?** They meant Israel had no reason for pride, no reason to boast that it was their strength that would win the promised-land. The only reason they stood where they did was because the Lord is powerful, loving and faithful.

What do these stones mean? They meant Israel had no reason to fear any enemy, not when the Lord who can stop a raging river in a heartbeat was with them to keep His promises.

But those stones weren't just for the ancient Israelites and their children. God had His

prophet write about these **stones** in His Holy Word so they can still teach us today, right along with every other passage of God's rock-solid Bible.

When pride wants us to look to our own accomplishments, remember how the Bible tells us the **world and all who live in it belong to the Lord** (Psalm 24). The only reason we have anything and can do anything, is because God generously given us life, health, possessions, abilities and family. Even our faith in Him is His gracious gift. When we, like Peter, confess **Jesus is the Christ**, Jesus reply applies to you and me: **this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.**

When trouble, difficulty, hardship press down and push us toward worry and despair, remember how the same Lord who stopped a raging river is the same Lord who has promised to be with us always. And the Bible say: **If God is for us, who can be against us?** Answer: No on and nothing.

But will God be for us? We don't deserve for Him to be on our side, not when we've fallen into thankless pride and sinful despair over and over.

Yet you can be sure He will be with you. You can know for certain because of another **stone memorial** the Bible tells us about. This **sign** for God's people is just one stone, one large, round stone that used to seal Jesus' grave. You know, the Jesus who is the eternal Son of God who became true man, born from Abraham's family to be that promised Savior of the nations.

After He lived a holy life free from all pride and sinful despair to cover all our sin of misplaced trust, Jesus laid down His life on the cross. There Jesus let the raging flood of punishment our sins of worry and self-reliance sweep over Himself, instead of us.

And now that **stone** in front of Jesus' tomb is rolled away. His grave is empty! Jesus lives as the undeniable proof that all who trust in Him

have forgiveness of every sin and a home in heaven. Jesus, that same “river stopping” Lord of old lives and stands by your side to be your strength in every trouble through His never failing promises.

So, What do these stones mean? They mean God is with His people! He and He alone has brought us this far, He and He alone will see us through to eternal joys! So go forward each day confidently trusting in Him and *only* Him, never us, only Him. Amen.

May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our Fathers, may he never leave us or forsake us. Amen.