

## **Remembering the Fear – Joshua 4:1-24**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION: TWO TYPES OF FEAR**

Have you ever lived in a healthy fear of another person? I'm not talking about living in fear of an evil or abusive person or worrying about what some terrible person might do to you. Instead, I'm talking about a healthy fear of another person, perhaps one who was in a position of authority over you or maybe one who just seemed so wise and intelligent that even having a conversation with them was intimidating and made you stumble over your words?

Well, as I thought about this question in my own life, two people came to mind of whom I lived in 2 different types of healthy fear. One, as you might imagine, was my Dad. While my Dad and I had many differences and disagreements during my growing up years, one thing was constant, and that was my fear of disobeying or disrespecting him. This fear of him came somewhat from his intimidating personality, but primarily from his consistent and very effective methods of discipline. As I made choices throughout each day, ever present in my mind was the important consideration of how my Dad would view the choice I was about to make and how he would respond and discipline me if he found out about it and it was out of step with his rules and expectations. This was a healthy fear that helped me make much better choices in life. When I did make poor choices and suffered the consequences he always gave me, I quickly learned that it was much better for me and a whole lot less painful to just obey him and follow his rules.

The second person that came to mind when I thought of people of whom I lived in fear, was Mr. C., our high school administrator and one of my best teachers. Now the fear I had of him was quite different than the fear I had of my Dad. With Mr. C. my fear was due to what I viewed as his superior wisdom and knowledge and insight into Scripture and pretty much any topic you could choose to discuss. I lived in awe of his wisdom and knowledge and the way he could communicate clearly and intelligently on any topic...and the way he could get me excited about things I had previously considered boring, dry or uninteresting.

But while I loved being in Mr. C.'s class and listening and learning from him, if I ever had to have a one-on-one conversation with him my mind would completely shut down in fear, and I felt like whatever came out of my mouth sounded idiotic to him. And Mr. C. wasn't even trying to be intimidating, and he really had no intention of exalting himself as more intelligent than me. He just exuded intelligence and wisdom and I felt inadequate in his presence. But the healthy part of this fear of Mr. C. was that it kept me in humility and caused me to listen and soak up and want to put into practice everything he taught me.

Now I'm sure most of you can probably identify various people in your lives who have created both of these types of fear within you, and you can probably also think of lots of positive things that resulted from your fear of these people. Well today, in the book of Joshua, we're going to see how important a healthy fear actually is in our lives...specifically a healthy fear of the Lord. Turn with me, if you would, to Joshua, chapter 4, where we pick up just after the Lord had miraculously cut off the flow of the Jordan River and dried out the ground so the whole nation of Israel could cross over into the Promised Land.

## **II. A COMMAND FROM THE LORD: 12 MEN, 12 TRIBES, 12 STONES TO REMEMBER (vs. 1-8)**

Let's begin our study today by reading verses 1 through 8, of Joshua, chapter 4, where the Lord speaks a command to Joshua involving 12 men, 12 tribes and 12 stones to remember. Beginning in verse 1:

***1 Now when all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, 2 "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, 3 and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight.'" 4 So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the sons of Israel, one man from each tribe; 5 and Joshua said to them, "Cross again to the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel. 6 "Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these***

***stones mean to you?' 7 then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever." 8 Thus the sons of Israel did as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, just as the Lord spoke to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel; and they carried them over with them to the lodging place and put them down there.***

We see here that the whole nation of Israel had just gotten across the river when the Lord spoke again to Joshua, commanding him to take the 12 men previously selected as representatives for each tribe back in chapter 3, and have those men head back to the middle of the Jordan where the priests carrying the ark were still standing firm on dry ground. And from that area where the priests were standing, the 12 men were to each pick up a stone and carry it back to the place where they were going to camp for the next few days on the west side of the Jordan.

The Lord spoke this commandment to Joshua, and after hearing the words of the Lord Joshua wastes no time in obeying God's command. In fact, throughout chapter 4, we will see Joshua, the priests, and all the people walking in perfect obedience to God's commands...a rare scenario in the history of the nation of Israel and of the world for that matter. God communicates. His people listen and pay attention. And then they actually do what he says. How much better life would go, if we always lived this way! As God had said earlier in Deuteronomy 5, verse 29:

***'Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!***

Well, Joshua obeys this command from the Lord by calling the 12 men he had previously appointed and telling them to cross back to the middle of the river, take up 1 stone each from where the priests were still standing with the ark, and put the stones on their shoulders to carry them back to their campsite. And he tells the men that these stones are to be a sign among the nation of Israel, a memorial to the sons of Israel forever...a monument and a signpost for future generations to remind them of the wonders God had performed here at the

Jordan River crossing. When their children would ask them what these stones meant to them, they were to tell them that these were rocks taken from the middle of the Jordan River to remind them of how God had miraculously cut off the waters of the river before the ark of the covenant so they could cross over.

You see God knows that people tend to be forgetters. Like my son, Isaac, used to say when I would ask him why he didn't do something I had asked him to do: "I'm a forgetter." The fact is, we're really good at "forgetting" what God has asked us to do and never getting around to his priorities because we're so focused on our own. We also easily forget the miracles and answers to prayer God has accomplished for us throughout our lives. Once the need has been met by God and the tension is past, it's so easy to just get on with life and get back to whatever we were doing before. And knowing this about humans, God was taking steps here to help his people and the whole world remember what he had done for them this day. These stones would serve not only as a reminder to those who had experienced it first-hand, but also as a teaching tool for future generations who weren't there when it happened. It would be a talking point for discussion about God and his miraculous work, and it would provide tangible evidence to future generations that this miracle really had happened. These really were stones taken from the middle of the Jordan River and stacked up by people who actually experienced the event.

Have you set up any of these kinds of memorials and teaching tools in your life? Do you write down or memorialize in any way, answers to prayer and miracles God has performed so that you'll never forget them and so that future generations will have an opportunity to learn from them? Do you take a moment to reflect on what God has done, praise him for it, and then document it for posterity? How helpful and important this would be for our children and their children and for us to reflect on when times get hard and we struggle to remember God's faithfulness to us and his hand of love that's sustained through so many challenges in our lives!

Well, in verse 8, we see more of that obedience I was talking about earlier. At the command of Joshua, the 12 men didn't argue or delay, but headed right back into the river bed to get the 12 stones and carry them back on their shoulders to their campsite.

### III. JOSHUA SETS UP A MID-RIVER MEMORIAL (vs. 9-10a)

Then something interesting happens. Joshua proceeds to make double sure this miracle is never forgotten. Let's read verses 9 through the first part of 10:

***9 Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day. 10 For the priests who carried the ark were standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything was completed that the Lord had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua.***

Now we're not told in the text whether God commanded Joshua to do this or if he did it on his own initiative. But whatever the case, Joshua takes steps to memorialize, in an even more indisputable way, the miracles God had performed here today. He stacks up 12 different stones in the middle of the river at the actual place where the priests carrying the ark were still standing. Thanks to the Lord he had nice dry ground on which to build his memorial and this one would provide even stronger evidence that something miraculous had truly happened here. How else would someone build a memorial with 12 large stones out in the middle of 100-foot-wide river? People looking at the river in the future would always see this conspicuous, man-made pile of stones sticking out above the surface of the water in the middle of the river and ask each other what those stones were about. In this way, God's miracles would be told and re-told over and over again!

And Joshua had plenty of time to build his 12-stone memorial because the priests carrying the ark continued to stand on dry ground in the middle of the river until everything was completed that God had announced ahead of time to Joshua and that he had shared with the people. We also see that interesting statement, "according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua." What I think this refers to is the promise that the Reubenites, Gadites and half-tribe of Manasseh had previously made to Moses: that even though they had already received their land on the east side of the Jordan, their men would still cross over the Jordan with the rest of the Israelites to fight the battle with them for the Promised Land. Moses had instructed Joshua to make sure these tribes kept their promise, and we see a reference to the fulfillment of their promise in the next few verses.

#### **IV. A HURRIED RIVER CROSSING AND THE FULFILLMENT OF A PROMISE (vs. 10b-13)**

Now let's read the last part of verse 10 through verse 13, where we get a description of the actual crossing of the river by the people:

***And the people hurried and crossed; 11 and when all the people had finished crossing, the ark of the Lord and the priests crossed before the people. 12 The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle array before the sons of Israel, just as Moses had spoken to them; 13 about 40,000 equipped for war, crossed for battle before the Lord to the desert plains of Jericho.***

The sons of Reuben, the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had faithfully kept their promise to Moses and 40,000 of their men crossed over the Jordan River fully equipped for war. Also, notice that the people hurried and crossed. You get a sense of urgency and that they were moving along at a good pace rather than just leisurely taking their time. I'm sure there must have been some pretty intense fear of the Lord and awe at his great power, and perhaps some concern over what would happen if he released the waters while they were still crossing. I'm sure they could all think of reasons why he would be justified in doing so! And all of them had definitely heard the stories of what had happened to the Egyptian army when they tried to cross the Red Sea in pursuit of the Israelites. Yet despite their fears, God was faithful to hold back the waters while his people crossed safely to the desert plains near the city of Jericho.

#### **V. THE LORD'S EXALTING OF JOSHUA AND THE LIFE-LONG FEAR OF HIM IT CREATED (v. 14)**

Let's look at verse 14 now and find out what God accomplished for Joshua through this miraculous event:

***14 On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life.***

In this amazing miracle, revealed to Joshua ahead of time through direct communication from God, Joshua was exalted in the sight of all Israel so that they revered him all the remaining days of his life, just as they had revered Moses. Now that word translated, “revered,” actually means, “feared.” It’s the same word translated in other places as the “fear” due to the Lord. The Hebrew word is “*yare*,” and it means “to be afraid” or “to stand in awe.” *Vines Expository Dictionary* tells us that this word, when “used of a person in an exalted position,...connotes ‘standing in awe.’ This is not simple fear, but reverence, whereby an individual recognizes the power and position of the individual revered and renders him proper respect.” Through this miracle at the Jordan River, God caused all the people of Israel to stand in awe, having life-long fear and respect for their leader, Joshua. They now knew without a doubt that he was God’s chosen leader for them and they had an intense dose of both types of fear that I had for my Dad and Mr. C: 1) respect for his authority and power and discipline; and 2) awe of his intense wisdom and knowledge flowing out of his connected, submitted relationship with the living God.

Now in many people this type of exalting would corrupt them and inflate their ego and lead them into all kinds of selfishness and greed and abuse of power. Take a brief survey of human history some time and note how many kings and leaders were corrupted by and abused their unlimited power. But God’s man Joshua was different. He had a firm view of his identity as God’s servant that flowed out of a lifetime of watching God work through his mentor, Moses, and of learning from the many years of God’s discipline he had walked through in the wilderness with the rebellious and stubborn children of Israel. Elsewhere in Scripture, we learn that Joshua was the attendant of Moses “from his youth.” In that role, he had seen and experienced a lot and God had prepared him over a lifetime for this moment and for the calling he now had. Joshua had learned that his strength and wisdom and power didn’t come from himself, but came from a dependent relationship with the living God where he listened, trusted and obeyed God’s holy Word. Joshua knew the fear of the Lord and lived in humble dependence on his guidance, strength and power!

But why did God need to exalt Joshua and cause the people to fear him? He needed to do this because people will only wholeheartedly and gladly listen to, obey and follow those whom they fear in this way...respecting their authority, power and the effectiveness of their discipline, and convinced that they are

speaking truth and have the wisdom and knowledge needed to guide them down the right path. And this is what God accomplished for Joshua through these amazing events at the Jordan River. This is something Joshua would desperately need in order to lead this challenging group of people to take the Promised Land and walk into the rest God wanted to provide them.

## **VI. ANOTHER COMMAND FROM THE LORD FOLLOWED BY OBEDIENCE AND COMPLETION OF GOD'S WONDERS (vs. 15-18)**

Well, as we move on to verses 15 to 18, we read about the conclusion to these miraculous events:

***15 Now the Lord said to Joshua, 16 "Command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that they come up from the Jordan." 17 So Joshua commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan." 18 It came about when the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord had come up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up to the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before.***

Once again, we see more direct communication from God and more simple obedience from Joshua and the priests. And as they listen to God and walk in obedience to his commands, God brings these miracles to a dramatic and orderly conclusion. When the priests followed Joshua's command and walked out of the Jordan River bed, everything simply returned to the way it had been before. I find it interesting how matter-of-fact and orderly the miracle seems to conclude. We don't read about a massive tidal wave of water sweeping down the river and washing people away or destroying towns. Instead we just get this picture of the water going calmly back into place so that it looked just as it had before the priests carrying the ark had stepped into the water...except, of course, for that conspicuous pile of stones sticking out of the water in the middle of the river...a reminder that God had done something amazing here. This orderly conclusion is just more evidence of God's power at work and how this was not just a so called, "natural phenomenon." It was a powerful, miraculous work of the living God! And as he returned the water to its place, God preserved the 12-stone memorial in the middle of the river to testify to the coming generations of what he had done.



## VII. SETTING UP THE 12-STONE MEMORIAL SO THAT PEOPLE WILL KNOW THE LORD'S MIGHT AND LIVE IN FEAR OF HIM (vs. 19-24)

And this brings us to our final 6 verses for today, where we discover the timing of these events, the location of Israel's campsite, and what God wanted all people to learn from these miraculous events. Beginning in verse 19:

***19 Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month and camped at Gilgal on the eastern edge of Jericho. 20 Those twelve stones which they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. 21 He said to the sons of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?' 22 then you shall inform your children, saying, 'Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.' 23 "For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; 24 that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever."***

First, we notice that the date of these events was recorded for us. The crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land happened on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the first month, the month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar. Nisan crosses the months of March and April on our calendar. And the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan was, significantly, 4 days before Passover, which always takes place on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. The nation of Israel crossed the Jordan River in God's perfect timing, because as we'll see in chapter 5 of Joshua, God had something very important that his people needed to do before they celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land, and it would require 3 days: they needed to be circumcised, identifying themselves with the sign that said they were God's people, set apart for his purposes.

This shows us again how perfectly God is writing HIS-STORY, or history as we call it. He coordinates all things in his perfect timing to teach us who he is, what's important to him, and little by little reveal and confirm his plan to redeem, or set free from slavery, a people for himself through the shedding of blood of a Perfect Lamb, a perfect sacrifice for sins, as pointed to and later commemorated through Passover. God places signposts and markers and memorials and teaching tools

everywhere throughout history and the world around us, if we would only have eyes to see them. We'll talk more about this when we study chapter 5.

So the people crossed the Jordan on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan and camped at a place on the east side of Jericho which they named Gilgal. We'll also learn more about Gilgal and what it means in chapter 5. But as they camped at Gilgal, Joshua took those 12 stones the 12 men from the 12 tribes had taken from the middle of the Jordan River and he set up that memorial he had told them about. This memorial would be a teaching tool for future generations to provide opportunities for telling about the miracles God had performed here today. When their children would ask, "What are these stones?" then they were to tell them, "Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground."

Then chapter 4 comes to a close with Joshua standing next to his new 12-stone memorial and telling all the people why God had done what he had done today. He tells them in a short, concise statement, what God wanted the people of Israel and all people in all time periods to learn from this event. And he says, beginning in verse 23:

***23 "For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; 24 that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever."***

God performed this miracle at the Jordan River, ordained that it was written down in Scripture, and left behind a 12-stone memorial of it, so that everyone, everywhere, at all times in history would know that His hand is MIGHTY...and not just that it was mighty at this point in history, but that it IS mighty! The present-tense grammar is very important here. God's awesome power and authority over his creation is and always will be complete and absolutely effective to carry out his purposes, to alter the ordinary operation of the world around us at his command, and to execute perfect justice and discipline in his timing.

And notice WHY God wants all peoples of the earth to know that his hand is mighty: "***so that you may fear the Lord your God forever***"...not just back in Old Testament times, but that you would fear the Lord your God throughout all ages

and into eternity...FOREVER! And here we are at fear again...the fear of the Lord...a rather unpopular topic in this day and age when people prefer to think of God as just love, love, love. And you know what? God is perfect love. That's such a true statement. There is no other one who knows us and loves us like he does and who shows us so perfectly what love is. In fact, I'd go so far to say that if we don't believe and accept and live in the present reality of God's personal love for us through Jesus Christ, we're just going to be doing religion...just trying to keep a list of rules so we can try and earn God's approval and love. And guess what? We'll never get there. We can never do enough to be deserving of God's love and acceptance.

But the beautiful truth is that God knows us and loves us as we are and has invited each of us to experience his unconditional love that never gives up...what Scripture calls, "the steadfast love of the Lord." He invites us into his love through a very simple and straightforward process: repentance and faith in Jesus Christ...simply owning up to our sin and rebellion against God and desiring to change...and then believing that God's Son, Jesus Christ, the perfect Passover Lamb, died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead, inviting him to be our personal Savior and the Lord of our lives. This is how we circumcise our hearts today, identifying ourselves as God's people...opening up the gift of God's unconditional love for us and beginning a connected relationship with him where he leads the way and we learn to trust and obey and walk into his purposes in life by his power.

So truly, we can say with confidence, God is love. In fact, in saying that we're actually quoting Scripture (1 John 4:8, 16). But let's not just stop there, because God is also powerful beyond comprehension, possessing awesome majesty and holiness, zealous for the good and holiness of his people, and fully committed to doing whatever it takes to keep us in line with his purposes and discipline us effectively when we go astray. It's his love, in fact, that leads him to do this. And these truths about God's power, authority, majesty, holiness and zeal in working for our good through discipline should lead us into a very healthy and robust fear of the Lord that incorporates both types of fear that I described in relation to my Dad and Mr. C...a fear of what kinds of discipline he may employ should we wander from his ways and a fear that keeps us in humble awe of his perfect wisdom and knowledge, seeking to learn from him and willing to put what we learn into practice.

## VIII. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Do you have a healthy fear of the Lord today? Do you believe that he is just as mighty and powerful and fully engaged with his people and this world as he was when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River on dry ground at his command? Do you truly believe that those who ignore the signs and markers he's placed throughout the world and throughout history and in this amazing book called the Bible, refusing to open the gift of his love and forgiveness through repentance and faith in Christ...Do you believe that they will be held accountable for their sin and rebellion and ignoring of the One who created them and is right now holding them together and is actually the very reason for their existence? Do you believe, as Scripture says, that it's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31)?

And for most of you who have already opened God's gift of love and forgiveness through Christ, do you think God cares at all about your priorities and your choices and the way you spend your time? Do you think he notices when you step off the path of his ways and do things you know are wrong or allow ungodly attitudes to take root in your life? With my Dad, I could occasionally get away with something wrong and he wouldn't catch me. There were a few bad things I managed to pull off and he never found out about. But that is never the case with our all-knowing God. He sees all and knows all and he doesn't just want us to walk in his ways because he's on a power trip and wants to see if he can make us obey.

No. God wants us to walk in his ways and make good choices because he loves us deeply as his own children and knows how harmful and destructive sin and sinful attitudes are in our lives and the lives of others. And he's going to love us enough to employ whatever disciplinary means are necessary to help us learn not to run out in the road and get hit by a semi-truck. Having some healthy fear of God's discipline is a really good thing that will help keep us walking down his good paths. Listen to what Deuteronomy 6, verse 24, tells us about the fear of the Lord:

***"So the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today.***

A healthy fear of the Lord is for our good always and for our very survival! If you do a survey of references to the fear of the Lord in Scripture, you'll quickly notice that it's the key ingredient to both wisdom and knowledge and it's always connected to knowing and living God's Word. What's the beginning of wisdom and knowledge according to Psalms and Proverbs? In other words, what the one thing you need before you can even begin to be wise and knowledgeable? THE FEAR OF THE LORD. You need humility before the living God, a healthy fear of his power and authority and majesty and a heart belief that he possesses perfect wisdom and knowledge that will lead to good in your life when you believe it and put it into practice.

Remember the fear of the Lord, my friends! God works powerfully within those who will fear him, listening, trusting and obeying him in all things. The fear of the Lord is the foundation to effective living life with God and walking in his ways by his power. Without it you won't take him seriously or believe his Word really works; you'll think he doesn't notice or care about the choices you're making; and you'll set yourself up for his very effective discipline. Remember the fear of the Lord.

And don't forget the other important lesson we've learned from today's study in Joshua. Make sure you remember and document and memorialize the great and miraculous things God has done for you throughout your life and will continue to do as you walk in humble dependence on him. Don't be a forgetter, but find ways to remember God's work in your life and ensure you pass it on to your children and future generations. Put up signposts about what God has done!

As we close today, I have an assignment for you: spend some time in the coming weeks thinking back through your life and identifying the key points where you clearly saw the hand of God at work in writing your story, working wonders on your behalf, showing you his personal love in tangible ways, and guiding you along in your journey with him. And don't just think about them. Write them down in a journal. Praise God for them. Share them with your kids. Share them with a friend. Put up signposts. Think of creative ways you can make sure that future generations hear about the mighty things God has done in your life and that you yourself never forget them.

If you complete this assignment, I'm confident you'll be amazed and encouraged at all the things God has accomplished in your life! And you'll be bringing great glory to God and helping to ensure that the next generation knows who he is and how to walk with him!