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Rock On
Joshua 4

INTRODUCTION

Our memories are not very reliable. Social psychologist Anthony Greenwald in an article in *American Psychologist* wrote that we are ruled by a totalitarian ego that ruthlessly destroys information it doesn't want to hear and, like all fascist leaders, rewrites history from the standpoint of the victor. In other words, we slant our own memories to make us look better.

Psychiatrist Daniel Offer along with colleagues wrote a book entitled *Regular Guys: 34 Years Beyond Adolescence*. It was about a study he and his associates started when he was a resident in psychiatry. They interviewed 73 14-year-old boys about their home lives, sexuality, religion, parents and other emotionally charged topics. They were able to contact and interview these boys 34 years later when they were 48 years old. They found the men's ability to recall accurately what they said as teenagers was no better than chance. In other words, if they had just guessed randomly at what they said they would have done as well as they did by recalling the incident from memory. Those who remembered themselves as being bold and outgoing teenagers had as teens identified themselves as shy. The men's current self concepts blurred their memories and painted their teenage self in the image of their adult self.

Though our memories are not nearly as accurate as we like to think they are they are nevertheless crucial to who we are. There are some things all of us fear, one being the diagnosis, "it's cancer." But another is getting Alzheimer's. There is something especially tragic about a person being alive but unable to remember. When a person can no longer recall events in their own life and cannot recognize the people who are closest to them it is as though that person is no longer really there at all. I read an account on the Alzheimer's web site of one woman who has early onset Alzheimer's. Her 12-year-old daughter Emma said is saddened that she won't be able to get to know her own mother. She said, "I know that my mom is (there) underneath the Alzheimer's, but I don't think I'll ever see (her)." In many ways our memories make us who we are.

Our memories are also critical for our spiritual identity and health. Spiritual Alzheimer's, a condition in which we can no longer remember important spiritual

events, is a deadly condition. We will see how important memory is to our spiritual health in Joshua 4, the passage from the Bible we will look at today.

THE INCIDENT

God Wanted All The People Involved

What happens in this chapter might not seem like an especially big deal, but there is a reason a chapter in God's Word is dedicated to it. It is because what happens in this chapter is something we all must do. In this incident the Israelis take rocks from the now miraculously dry river bed as they walk through and use them to build a memorial. The rocks had to be carried on the shoulders of the people who transported them because they were large rocks.

You've seen the little piles of rock that people build down along the beach, haven't you? They find rocks along the beach that they collect then stack them up to make a little tower. It is a way of making their mark, saying, "I was here." The kinds of rocks used by Joshua's people were not like those rocks. They were much bigger. So when they were stacked up they made a very noticeable memorial tower.

But who was going to transport the rocks out of the riverbed and build a tower with them on dry land? This is not high tech work that requires specialized training. Pick up the rock, put it on your shoulder and haul it up out of the riverbed. That requires a certain amount of strength, but nothing unusual. So Joshua could have selected at random any squad of soldiers and they could have done the job.

He didn't do that. He selected one man from each tribe and assigned them to be part of the rock band. Why one man from each tribe? This wasn't something that only an isolated group was to participate in. Having one man from each tribe said this action is something we are all to do. Every tribe is to be represented, meaning every single person is to vicariously participate in this action. The whole nation was involved in this. In other words, this is something all of the people of God should do. That includes us today.

God Wanted The People To Remember

God told them to make a stone pillar with the rocks. This stone pillar was to be a reminder of the amazing thing God had done for them. Had God not miraculously stopped the water of the river from flowing those rocks would still be under water and Israel would still be on the east side of the Jordan River. God performed a miracle to enable them to enter the promised land. That is as true for us today as it was for the people of Israel back then. We need to remember that just as they did.

The rocks were to be much more than a landscaping feature. They were not merely intended to be something that the donkey from the movie *Shrek* would like at and say, “I like those rocks. Those are nice rocks.” It was important that Israel never forget this incredible miracle. The idea of the memorial pillar was that future generations who had not witnessed that astounding event would say, “What’s that pile of rocks supposed to mean?” And the answer would be that those rocks had once been under water in the river, but God stopped the river from flowing so that the people of Israel could enter the land. Those rocks were brought from the river bed as evidence that God did this miracle. They are to remind us of what he is like and of the great things that he has done for his people.

We understand this kind of thing. Washington D. C. is a city full of monuments. Chief among them are the Washington monument, the Jefferson Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial. Those buildings stand as reminders to us of what those great men did. The buildings serve no other purpose. They are there to honor those men and to make sure that we never forget them. If you go to Honolulu you can visit Pearl Harbor and see the Arizona Memorial. That is a monument dedicated to the memory of the nearly 1200 who died on the battleship the USS Arizona when it was sunk in 1941 and the more than 2400 men who died in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The memorial honors their actions, but also reminds us of the value of what we have in this country. It has been purchased at high cost.

This chapter is all about remembering. The people of Israel needed to remember. Even though they had witnessed something astonishing we humans have a sad tendency for even profound blessings to fade into the mists of time. The previous generation of Israelis had seen God part the waters of the sea and do other mind boggling things, yet at the crucial moment they forgot all of that and failed to believe that he could come through for them as they fought the people of Canaan.

Unfortunately forgetting is a common problem for us humans. Our memories are so very fallible. Laurie and I occasionally are asked by parents of young children how we handled various discipline situations and way too often we simply can’t remember. I was talking with the Vandovers and the Jacobs both about the challenges they are facing as parents of young children, among them being totally exhausted when the kids don’t sleep at night. I remember going through those days. I remember that we read books and listened to supposed “experts” on child rearing, yet we would encounter situations with our kids that didn’t seem to fit the books or the experts’ advice. I recall talking to people who were more mature and had been through it all and asking them how they handled some of those situations and being astounded when they said, “Uh, we don’t remember.” I thought, “How

could you not remember? I will never forget these things.” I was wrong. Despite how huge and how vivid and at times difficult all those child rearing challenges were, despite the fact that they seemed unforgettable, I have forgotten not all of it but the large majority. Our problem is we forget.

Psalms 105:5 commands us, “Remember the wonders he (God) has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.” Psalm 103:2 says, “Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” Just like Joshua and the people of Israel needed to build a memorial to help them remember the great deeds of God so we need to remember.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Why is it important to remember?

It creates gratitude

There are a couple of things about gratitude we need to remember. The first is that it isn't just a good idea, it is commanded by God. Kind of like those old TV commercials that refer to wearing seat belts and said, “Buckle up. It's not just a good idea. It's the law.” Gratitude is not the law, but it is more than merely a good idea. It is the will of God. We are instructed in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to give thanks always and told it is the will of God for us. Think of that. Every human at some level, whether conscious of it or not, wants to know what the Almighty God, the Creator, the Judge of all, wants us to be and do. He tells us. He wants us to be grateful and to give thanks. Psalm 100:4 says, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.” God wants us to be people who live constantly in thanksgiving. Gratitude is to be the very nature of our existence right from the very core of our being.

Why does God make a big deal about being thankful? Has he got some sort of psychological deficit that makes it important to him to have people show appreciation? Absolutely not. At issue here is a fundamental principle about how we relate to God and how we view ourselves in this world. If you reduce everything down we only have two alternatives. One alternative is to be grateful and giving thanks. The other alternative is to be proud and think we deserve something. We might think we deserve the good things we have or we might be dissatisfied and complaining. If we are in that latter category we are in a spiritually dangerous place. We are saying to God that we don't like whatever he has given us or how he has made the world and we think we deserve better. He owes us. We don't usually put it that way, but that's what it is, and that's an ugly place.

I thought of my friend, Mike Riley. Before he became the head football coach at Oregon State University the football program there was beyond awful. In the 25 years before Mike arrived they never won more than 4 games in a season. In those years they averaged 2 wins and 9 losses every year. They had no winning seasons and went to exactly zero bowl games. During that stretch they had one period of 4 years where they won a grand total of 3 games in 4 years and lost 40. The 2 years just prior to Mike taking over they won 2 and lost 9 in one year and won 1 and lost 10 in the other. Oregon State was quite possibly the worst division I football program in the country.

In the last 10 years with Mike as the head coach they have averaged more than 7 wins a season, they have won 9 or more games 4 times and they have been to bowl games 7 times, 5 of which they have won. It has been a nearly miraculous turnaround. But in 2011 they had a rough season, winning only 3 games. Do you know what happened? Some people starting howling for Mike to be fired. Even though they turned it around last year and again won 9 games, there are still a few who are unhappy because now they think Oregon State ought to be even better, going to the Rose Bowl or challenging for a national championship. They have forgotten to be thankful to Mike for what he has done for that program, so they complain. Instead they should be thanking him and praising him for what he has done.

That's kind of like us. Yeah, maybe you miraculously brought us into the Promised Land of your kingdom at enormous cost to yourself, but what have you done for me lately? That may be a good thing, but like the Oregon State fans, now I want more. Fine, you brought me here, but now you need to do better.

Are we going to be people who recognize the amazing things God has already done for us and live with continual gratitude for them, or are we going to think that we are the center of all of life, that God must serve us and he ought to give us what we want? Actor Ashton Kutcher was the subject of a little piece in *Time* magazine back in 2009. They have this article where they ask 10 questions of some notable person, and he was the subject in that particular issue. One of the questions they asked him was what he missed about growing up and living in the Midwest. He said, "I miss being around people that don't complain. I'm in the drama business and there are a lot of dramatic people that seem to be not very happy with where they are." Who wants to be like that?

That brings up an interesting truth about gratitude. It is not only the right response to God and the right way to relate to him, but it is also the essential attitude for

having a peaceful and joyful life. When we are complaining and demanding we will never experience joy. Nor will we be at peace. We will always see life from a negative slant. It is very simple. Have you ever been blessed or enriched by a person who was complaining? If we have any desire to be of benefit to others, to bless them, we must become grateful people who continually give thanks to God for what he has done for us. You can be a continually grateful person, giving thanks to God in all things with the result that there will be joy and peace, or you can be doubting, demanding and complaining and be unhappy. Psalm 9:1-2 are helpful to remember. David wrote, "I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you." It's real simple. Do you want to be glad and rejoice in God in your heart? Then give thanks to him with all your heart. Giving thanks to him with all our hearts starts with remembering what he has done for us. That is why God made it a priority for the people to set up a monument to enable them to always remember what he had done for them.

It builds faith

Verse 24 of Joshua 4 says of God stopping the water of the Jordan, "He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God." So part of the reason for this miracle was to send a message to the human race, especially the part of it living in Canaan at that time. It told them who Israel's God is and what he can do.

But notice the last phrase, "that you might always fear the Lord your God." Both the miracle itself and the memorial of it were intended to enable God's people to "fear the Lord." The point is to have awe of him, to know and to trust who he is. Psalm 112:1 says, "Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands." That says that those who have awe of God will delight in his commands, so they will do them. In other words, when we remember what God has done it causes us to fear God enough to trust him and know that his commands are best for us, so we'll do them.

Learning to trust by remembering is something we have all had experience with in life. I have had a long term battle with allergy and sinus problems. I've gone through just about every treatment available short of surgery. My allergic reactions cause the swelling of nasal polyps, cutting off air flow to my sinuses. One of the more chilling treatments I've gone through was done by an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat specialist). After thorough examination and discussion he concluded the best course of action for me was to inject a corticosteroid right into the nasal polyps. He had this long, thin needle that he put up my nose and then

gave me a shot right into those inflamed nasal tissues. If the very thought of that makes you squirm, you have company. Seeing that needle coming at me made me want to run away screaming like a little girl. But before he used the needle he sprayed an anesthetic into my nose to numb those tissues. It was uncomfortable, but it wasn't as painful as it sounds and as I thought it was going to be. And the result was dramatic. Within one day I was getting better and within a few days I was breathing better than I had in most of my adult life. The effect wasn't permanent. So a year later I had to go in for another treatment. But this time I remembered. I remembered that while it wasn't pleasant neither was the shot that painful, and more important I remembered that it made an enormous difference in my health. Because I remembered I trusted the doctor. I went to the appointment with no apprehension. Because I remembered what he had done before I was able to trust the doctor and his treatment. Remembering built faith in him.

Laurie and I have experienced the importance of remembering just recently. This has been an interesting year for us on the financial front. Following on the heels of a wedding last year we have had another wedding this year. Those events combined put a galactic dent in our finances. Actually they've obliterated our finances. Then we learned in the middle of the year that our house has been serving as a buffet for termites, so we had to tent the house at a painful cost. Another big hit in the wallet. Then came the coup d'grace. Early in the year because our health insurance premiums were going into high orbit we had to change our coverage. The most reasonable option was to significantly raise our deductible, which we did. I should have known that would be a certain guarantee that we would soon incur major medical expenses. Sure enough we learned in August that Laurie had to have surgery. We didn't have the money for that so we immediately were concerned. I began looking at options for trying to pay for this. Then it got worse. She was going to need a second surgery. At that point we were way beyond "how are we going to pay for this" and well into "uh, does anybody know a good bankruptcy lawyer?" It was the perfect storm financially. We were in trouble.

But that's where this passage intersects our lives. We remembered. We remembered the time I was in college and it looked like I was going to have to drop out. God provided dramatically at the last moment. We remembered when Laurie and I, because of mistakes made by a tax "expert" who had been preparing our tax returns, faced a huge and totally unexpected tax bill with the IRS and thought we were finished financially. Once again God provided in an astounding way. We remembered when our daughter registered to go to college and I felt like I was going before a firing squad. I needed a blindfold so I wouldn't have to see what was going to happen. But once again God provided for us. In fact he provided

for college for both kids. It wasn't always easy, but somehow they got through. Time and time again in our lives God has worked in surprising ways to provide for our needs. So when all this hit we said, "Lord, you have always provided what we need. We trust and know that somehow, in ways we cannot see right now, you will get us through this too." And we have already seen evidence that God is indeed providing for us, though we don't yet have the full answer. Remembering enabled us to trust.

The people of Israel unfortunately had previously demonstrated the flip side of this idea. In Psalm 106:7 we read, "when our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea." God worked many miracles to get out of Egypt in the first place but when they got pinned on the shore of the Red Sea they forgot all about those miracles. They stridently accused Moses of bringing out there to die. They forgot what God had done for them, and when God's people forget they rebel. When we don't remember we are on our way to rebelling against God because we don't believe we can trust him.

Not only is it important for our personal growth and peace in the Lord to remember what he has done for us it is important that we remember for the good of others. Ephesians 5:19 tells us to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." Why are we to do that? Because in speaking to each other with those psalms and hymns and songs we are calling to mind who God is and what he has done, and that enables others to trust him and obey him.

It honors God

Finally we should think about what memorials do. The Washington Monument honors George Washington. The Arizona Memorial honors all those who gave their lives there. When we create a memorial to God's deeds, when we remember them it honors him.

That, again, makes sense. When you talk about something that someone has done that was really good, it honors that person. While I was in the hospital waiting for Laurie during her recent surgery I got engaged in a conversation with another person that eventually got around to our kids. At one point we discussed sports and the topic of Toby and football came up. I related how Laurie and I thought it was ridiculous when he brought up the idea of going out for football at Cal Poly. He had no chance. But then I told how he had actually walked on and made that team against the odds when we thought it impossible. Then I shared about his efforts to get to medical school and become a doctor. That same perseverance and

willingness to work that gave him success in football will do the same in the medical field. As I recalled what he has done I was honoring him. The same is true of God. When we relate the deeds of God, when we remember what he has done for us, he is glorified. We are worshiping him!

How should we remember?

One thing you can do is to keep a journal. Write down what is going on in your life so you can record key moments when you have seen God act and do his amazing work. Perhaps you might want to keep a prayer list where you record answers to prayers. One important way to remember is to tell the story. Tell it to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Relate the story in your family. I love to have time around the table at Thanksgiving and Christmas when we talk about what God has done in our lives this year. As you do that you are honoring God and building your faith and that of others in addition to expressing your gratitude to him.

We have two rocks sitting by our front porch. We put one of them there at a time when our kids were in college and money was really tight. We hit one point where we had a bunch of unusual expenses and didn't know how we were going to manage it. One night our front doorbell rang. When I got to the door and opened it no one was there but there was a paper bag sitting on the porch. Inside the bag were a bunch of rocks, and a pile of cash. We got through that time because of the cash. We took one of those rocks and put it by our front door to remind us. The other rock was one we saw on the beach and picked up. It was right at the time when Toby, the last of our two, graduated from college. We kept the rock as a reminder that God provided for our kids to get through college. Near those rocks is a welcome sign in the shape of an anchor. Do you know what it represents? It is a reminder of how God worked in our lives to bring this church into being.

Have you ever thought it a little unusual that a big part of our worship services involve singing? In our family that's not surprising because most of us, with one big exception, can sing. But not everyone is as musical as our family is. Why all the singing? Because as we sing we are remembering. We are remembering who God is and what he has done. We are building a monument.

Jesus Christ is supposed to be the Lord of my life, and I do need to trust him every day. And every day presents me with opportunities to doubt, with temptations to go my own way instead of his, to totally forget he is there, to ignore him altogether. Because of this I need constant reminder. I need to gather with other believers every week and have that experience of singing a song and saying, "Oh that's right. God is faithful. He is good. He has always provided and always will, so I

need to give thanks, trust him today, and obey him.” Actually it feels to me at times like I need church a lot more than once a week, because the forgetfulness and the doubts seem to show up daily. That’s why we must remember always.

In football they have a way of commemorating great events. When they score a touchdown in the NFL they often do a TD dance. Perhaps I need to work on my TD dance. Hey, Toby was accepted to med school at UCSD! Time to do the dance.

Perhaps you have creative ways of remembering. Artistic people like Barb Farrington might create works of art that mark God’s work in their lives. Maybe you are musical or poetic and can write something to remind you of what he has done. Or maybe you might want to write on a rock a description of some way that God has worked in your life and keep it around as a reminder. Do whatever you need to do, but remember what the Lord has done!