

INTRODUCTION

For those of you who enjoy a quick read, I came across a list of “thin books” the other day. A thin book is one that doesn’t have much to say. Maybe you will get a chuckle out of reading one of these thin books: (1) *20 Beauty Secrets* by Janet Reno; (2) *Things I Love About Bill* by Hillary Clinton; (3) *America’s Most Popular Lawyers* (3) *Guide to Dating Etiquette* by Mike Tyson; (4) *Amish Telephone Directory* (5) *Spotted Owl Recipes* by the Sierra Club; and finally, (6) *My Plan to Catch the Real Killers* by O.J. Simpson.

I’m so glad the Bible is not a thin book; it’s a great book full of wonderful stories and principles on how we can live a successful life. That’s why here we open the Bible every Sunday morning.

At this moment, our congregation is in a transitional time as we prepare to occupy our new facility in two weeks. So where do we go to get directions? The Word of God. 3,400 years ago, Joshua led the children of Israel across the Jordan River into the Promise Land of Canaan. During the month of April, I have been using this wonderful Old Testament Book as a guide to prepare our church to claim the promise God has for us. We’re calling it “Share the Joy.” It’s so much more than moving into a new building—we see it as a time when we are taking a new attitude into a new opportunity.

Our theme verse for Share the Joy is found in Joshua 3:5. Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.” The question people throughout East Texas have been asking is “When will the new building be ready?” However, a much more important question I’ve been asking is, “When will the church (the people) be ready for the new building?” We must prepare ourselves spiritually for what God is going to do.

Last week I spoke about how the Hebrew congregation stood on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The river represented both the border to blessing and a barrier to blessing. Only when the priests stepped into the raging water did it stop. You have to trust God *first* and *then* He releases His power. The reason many people live on the wrong side of the river is they are waiting for God to stop the water *before* they step in and God is waiting for them to step right into the water. When they stepped into the water, the river stopped flowing—a miracle! Don’t marvel at that too much. History tells us as recently as July 11, 1927, an earthquake struck the Jordan Valley and the Jordan River was blocked upstream for 21 hours. It doesn’t matter *how* God did it—but His timing is always perfect! Now they are on the other side of the River of Impossibility, so let’s pick up this exciting story in Joshua 4:1-7:

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, “Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put the down at the place where you stay tonight.”

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, “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 upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future,

when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”

Now skip down to verse 18 to see what happened:

And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to the place and ran at flood stage as before.

On the tenth day of the first month [Exodus 12:3—it was 40 years to the day after they left Egypt!] the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask you, ‘what do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. 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.”

There is a lot we can learn from this pile of stones at Gilgal. In fact, I want us to think about three ways these stones speak to us today. Let’s answer the question, “What do these stones mean?” First, they are:

I. STONES OF REMEMBRANCE

If you take the time to read Joshua 4, you’ll discover there were actually two piles of stones. First, Joshua made a pile of twelve large stones in the middle of the riverbed—while it was still dry. After the flow of the river returned, the rock pile could be seen protruding from the surface of the water. In generations to come, people could see the pile of stones rising from the middle of the river and would know someone had to have stacked them up when the river was dry. It would help them remember God stopped the flow of the mighty Jordan.

Then they took another twelve stones, one for each family-tribe, and carried them to their camp at Gilgal. They stacked them up in a way to make the site one people could return to and recognize. When the children of future generations asked the question, “What do these stones mean?” The parents and grandparents could use both rock piles as a teaching tool to help the children remember God had shown His mighty power on their behalf.

Today, each of us has stones of remembrance we need to stack up. When significant things happen in our lives, we often call them milestones. For those of you who have taken *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby calls them “spiritual markers.” A spiritual marker is a time in your life when you know God has revealed His presence and power in your life. It’s helpful to keep a record of them, because by remembering them, you can understand how God is working in the present.

The reason we need these reminders is that we all have a tendency to forget God's faithfulness. We all suffer from various levels of spiritual amnesia. Maybe you heard about a guy named John who had a really horrible memory. One day John ran into a friend whom he had not seen in a long time. He greeted him and said, "Bill, do you remember what a bad memory I had? Well, it's not bad any more. I went to a seminar that taught us how to remember things. It was a great seminar, and now I have a wonderful memory." Bill answered, "What was the name of the seminar?" John said, "Wait a minute, my wife went with me. I'll ask her." He turned and saw his wife nearby. Then he turned back to Bill and said, "What's the name of that flower with a long stem and thorns?" "Do you mean a rose?" "Yeah, thanks," John said, "Hey, Rose, what's the name of that seminar we attended?" All of us sometimes forget; that's why we have calendars, handheld organizers, or tie strings around our fingers.

The meaning of these stones of remembrance is simple:

GOD IS ABLE _____!

You can fill in your own end to that statement. For the Hebrews at Gilgal, it was *God is able* to get us across a river of impossibility. For Abraham it was *God is able* to give us a child when we are long past childbearing age. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego it was *God is able* to deliver us the fiery furnace. For Daniel it was *God is able* to shut the mouths of hungry lions. For some of you it is *God is able* to raise me from a bed of sickness; or *God is able* to heal our marriage; or *God is able* to take care of us financially. We must not forget the blessings of the past, because they serve as powerful reminders that whatever we face now or in the future: **GOD IS ABLE!**

As a church we stand on the threshold of a new chapter of ministry and opportunity. In 1955, 297 brave people came out to the edge of Tyler and paid \$38,000 for 2.5 acres of land. They built a little building and started sharing the love of Jesus with this community. The church continued to grow and by 1960 they knew they would have to build a new sanctuary—that's the building we are in today. The cost to build this building (without the side balconies and transepts) was a whopping \$800,000. This was at a time when the church budget was only about \$150,000. In other words, they were looking at a financial challenge to construct a huge building whose cost was 5X the offerings they were receiving annually. For us to build a building 5X our annual budget today would mean we would have to spend \$38 million. So relatively speaking, this \$26 million project is not as much of a financial challenge as our spiritual forefathers faced forty years ago! They had to borrow almost half the amount needed to pay for this building we are in now—but they were faithful to give until it was paid off.

We are all so excited about occupying the new Worship Center we need to be careful we don't neglect to remember the wonderful blessings God has poured out on our congregation since we have been meeting in this building over the past forty years. God has been faithful in so many wonderful ways in these past forty years. It would not be right for us to vacate this building without pausing and saying, "Thank you, Lord!"

In a few moments, I am going to direct those of you who have significant spiritual memories in this room to come forward and take a stone from one of the tables set up before you. These stones of remembrance will serve to remind you in years to come that God is able to meet any need you have in your life and in your family. Now, before I ask you to come forward and get your stone, let me give you some instructions. First, there are four experiences I will give you a chance to claim a stone of remembrance for: if you were saved and baptized in this room; if you were married in this room; if you attended the funeral of a child, spouse, or parent in this room; and if you participated in a family dedication here. Now, some folks could claim a stone on all four categories. Kay Green, who has been here for all 38 years of her life, qualifies on all four counts! But to insure we have enough stones for all three services, I will ask you to only claim one stone—so if you qualify for more than one, I will have you stand, but only come forward and claim one stone, please. Second, only one stone per immediate family please—in other words, if you were married here, both of you can come forward, but only take one stone. Okay, are you ready? We are going to honor God and honor the memories that have happened in this room.

First, if you were married in this room, would you please stand? I want you to take a moment and go back in your mind’s eye and remember what it was like on that special day. Now if you are coming forward to get your stone of remembrance, please make your way to the nearest table and claim your stone of remembrance—and husbands, you may kiss your bride!

Next, if this room was the location of the funeral service of an immediate family member—that is, if it were a spouse, a child, or a parent, would you stand? I know there are bittersweet memories of that day, but you can know God has given you grace and peace to this day. If you are going to claim your stone for this category, please move to the nearest table and do so—and remember the grace of God to sustain you to this day.

Third, if you participated in a child-parent dedication in this room, would you please stand? You may be the parent, or you may be the child. Families are important to God—so they are important to us. If you are going to claim your stone, please move forward at this time. Jesus said, “Let the little children come unto me . . . for of such is the kingdom of God.”

Finally, I’ve saved the best for last. If you were baptized in this building, would you please stand? I estimate over the past forty years there have been over 6,000 people baptized in this baptistry. If you are standing and haven’t claimed a stone yet, would you please come forward and claim your stone of remembrance? Jesus said there is “Joy in the presence of angels over one sinner that repents.” (Luke 15:11)

Now, if you didn’t fit in any of those four categories, but you have some blessed memories of the greatness of God in this building and you would like your own stone of remembrance, there will be some extras available in the Family Life Center over the next few weeks, just go there and ask for your own. Hang onto your stones, because I am going to give you some directions later.

For the Joshua generation, and for us, these stones are also

II. STONES OF RENEWAL

When Joshua set up the stones they weren't finished with His plan, they were only getting started. They still faced the daunting challenge of attacking Jericho, the most heavily fortified city of the ancient world. There were seven kingdoms occupying Canaan that would have to be conquered before the land would be theirs. The pile of stones at Gilgal served to demonstrate that Joshua and the people of God were willing to follow God's plan. Because they recognized God had been faithful to them in the past, they were willing to set up these stones as a way of saying, "God, we trust you with our future." They were renewing their commitment to God.

So there is another meaning I see in this rock pile. It is that

We must trust and obey Him!

When I was a kid growing up in L.A. (Lower Alabama), I went to Sunday School every week. When I was in the "Junior Department" (Middle School), we would meet for what was called an "opening assembly" before we went to our smaller classrooms. Our director, Mrs. Peacock, was a wonderful lady who loved kids. However, her piano repertoire was limited to only one song—"Trust and Obey"—and she couldn't play it very fast. So for three years, on *every* Sunday morning we sang that hymn. For years I thought the proper tempo was: "When we walk with the Lord . . . in the Light of His Word . . . what a glory He sheds on our way . . . while we do His good Will, He abides with us still . . . and with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey—for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." (Words by John H. Sammis)

Those are really great words! Think about it—an excellent summary of the Christian Life is found in that chorus: Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

Are you willing to renew our commitment to Trust God and to Obey Him? Notice: Good memories of God's goodness motivate us to be more faithful.

Sometimes I'll take out our wedding pictures and I'll look at the photographs taken the night Cindy and I were married. It just makes me love her more and want to be a better husband. These stones of remembrance remind us of God's love for us and this should cause us to want to be more faithful. Now, for those of you who have a stone, let me suggest you go home and take one of those permanent markers (like a Sharpie®), and write on the stone the date of your significant event. Some of you will write, "Married June 1, 1974" others may write, "Baptized on March 11, 1969." Then keep that rock displayed in a location where you can be reminded of God's goodness in your life. Go find some more stones and write other dates of significant spiritual events. Even if you don't use a stone, I suggest you write the date you were saved or baptized in the front of your Bible—make it a Stone of Renewal for you.

God has a great task for our church. Each of us must renew our commitment to serve Him. It's time to stop being a spectator and start being a servant. Mac McSpadden, one of our WWII heroes, reminded me a couple of weeks ago that my sailor Dad would have known what to do when the ship's public address system announced, "All hands on deck." At that moment, sailors stopped whatever they were doing and from the lowest apprentice to the highest admiral, everyone assembled on deck and together, the crew did whatever needed to be done. Folks, that's what our Commander is saying to us today: ALL HANDS ON DECK! We need *every* one of

you to renew your commitment to serve God. Our church has almost 10,000 members—about half of those hardly ever come—some say it’s too crowded up here. It is crowded now, but not in a couple of weeks—all hands on deck! There are hundreds of people who attend our church faithfully, but they haven’t joined, we need you—all hands on deck! Some of you used to work in some area of ministry, but you’ve gone into what you think of as “spiritual retirement”—all hands on deck!! These are stones of renewal.

There is one other truth symbolized by these stones. You may think I’m adding this point simply because it’s Easter—but that’s not true. These stones carry a deep spiritual meaning that is true whatever day of the year it is. These are

III. STONES OF RESURRECTION

Notice Joshua set up the twelve stones at a place called Gilgal. The name is significant. Skip over to Joshua 5:9: Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” So the place has been called Gilgal to this day. Gilgal means to “roll away” to “remove the shame.” What shame? Well, for forty years, God’s people wandered in endless circles of spiritual mediocrity and defeat. The wilderness represents a carnal Christian whose sinful, disobedient lifestyle brings shame to the name of Christ. The Jordan represents a death of that lifestyle.

Dr. Alan Redpath writes,

“Do you know what ‘Gilgal’ means? It means ‘the reproach has been rolled away.’ I want to say here that any believer, man, or woman, boy or girl, living in the wilderness of carnality and spiritual defeat and failure is a reproach to the holiness of God. But if we have crossed Jordan and established a bridgehead, the reproach has been rolled away, and Gilgal is a place of resurrection.” (*Victorious Christian Living*, p. 71)

Here’s the third exciting meaning of the stones at Gilgal:

God can restore life to dead dreams

Gilgal represented a new start for a new generation. Forty years of spiritual defeat and failure have been rolled away. And the fact they have this camp at Gilgal means they are now ready to follow the Lord wholeheartedly into the land He had given them. The dream that had been dead for forty years was now resurrected.

Now before you can have a resurrection, there must be a death. What died for Israel? The idea they could just stay in the desert—that dream had to die so God could give life to a new dream—His plan.

As a church and as individuals, we must first die to our own selfish plans and dreams. Only when we die to those, will we experience a resurrection of hopes and dreams—but this time, it will be God’s plan—not our own. One of my life verses I quote almost every day is found in Galatians 2:20—it speaks of death and resurrection. “For I am crucified with Christ (death to my selfish

plans), nevertheless I live (resurrection), yet *not I but Christ* lives in me.” Can you honestly say, like Paul, “I die daily?” Do you die to your own desires for sinful pleasure, for fame and recognition? Do you die to your lust for possessions and position?

These stones are stones of resurrection. They speak of the resurrection life of Jesus available for every one of us. Now I want you to fast-forward from Gilgal 1,400 years into the future—still 2,000 years in our past. There is another stone important to us—and it is clearly a stone of resurrection. Jesus was crucified for our sins. After spending three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, God raised Him from the dead. We read in Mark 16:2-4: Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

This is the “Gilgal” of the New Testament, because not only was the shame “rolled away” but also the stone was “rolled away.” All the shame of death and sin was erased because Jesus came forth from the grave like the Son of Righteousness, risen with healing in His wings. The message of that first Easter is the same message today. The women went back with this message: HE IS RISEN!

You see the stone was not rolled away for Jesus to walk out—the stone was rolled away so all the world could look in. The cross and empty tomb become our Gilgal. Isaac Watts said it well when he wrote, “At the cross; at the cross where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away (Gilgal), it was there by faith I received my sight and now I am happy all the day!” (“At the Cross” by Isaac Watts)

CONCLUSION

I don’t know everyone here personally, but I do know two things about you: I know what your greatest problem is and I know what your greatest need is. The greatest problem you have is the problem of sin. We all have it. The Bible says, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) Some folks are better than others, but we *all* fall short of God’s standard. It’s as if God said, “If you can jump from this platform into the balcony, you get a free pass into heaven.” Some of us would make it farther than others . . . but even the best athlete alive would fall far short. The problem? Gravity. It is the gravity of depravity that keeps us from living up to God’s standard. Your greatest problem is sin.

Your greatest *need* is forgiveness. Because it is the only thing that can address your greatest need. Today, Jesus offers forgiveness to you as a gift. Forgiveness is available to everyone—but it isn’t automatic. It is a gift you must accept by turning from your sins and turning to God—will you accept God’s offer today? You say, “What’s the price?” It’s free to you because Someone already paid the price for you. Jesus went to the cross and accepted the penalty for your sins—He paid it all so it can be offered free to you. It’s free, but it’s not cheap because it cost Jesus His precious blood.

Timothy McVeigh is scheduled for execution next month for the murder of 168 people in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. I personally believe in capital punishment,

because the Bible says God has given the power of the sword to the government (Romans 13:4). However, it is not our job as individuals to personally hurt wrongdoers. It is even possible for us to personally forgive wrongdoers while the government fulfills their role of “applying the sword.”

McVeigh’s execution will be the lead story on all the news broadcasts—but there is a story behind the story few people know about. Bud Welch’s daughter was killed in the bombing. He could not rid his heart of anger and bitterness toward McVeigh and his family, so in 1998, he traveled to visit Bill McVeigh, Timothy McVeigh’s father. Many people scorned Bill McVeigh for “fathering a monster,” and he was wary about Bud Welch’s visit. But Welch visited hoping to find healing.

They talked about their children over coffee at the kitchen table. There was a high school picture of Timothy McVeigh on the kitchen wall. Bud Welch looked at it and said to Bill, “What a good-looking boy.” Tears began to stream down Bill McVeigh’s face and he said, “I’m so sorry your daughter was killed.” Bud Welch later said, “I’ve never felt closer to God than at that moment. I felt as if a great burden had been rolled away from my shoulders.” They prayed together and when he left, it seems as if the bitterness and resentment was gone. And instead of simply seeking healing, he had brought a measure of healing to Bill McVeigh, another broken-hearted father, as well.

You see, the forgiveness of God not only removes your sin, it gives you the ability to forgive others as well. Will you accept God’s forgiveness today?

OUTLINE

I. STONES OF REMEMBRANCE

Meaning: God is able!

II. STONES OF RENEWAL

Meaning: Trust and obey Him!

III. STONES OF RESURRECTION

Message: God can restore life to dead dreams

Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away." *Mark 16:2-4*



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If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes