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WHAT MEAN THESE STONES?

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The second generation of the children of Israel had wandered in the wilderness for most of, or all of, their lives. It's all they had really known. Some of them had been alive during the terrible days of slavery in Egypt, and remembered the ten terrible plagues and the parting of the Red Sea that God had used to free them from slavery. Those same people also remembered the Israelite's disobedience to God, over and over again, resulting in their own misery and even in their being turned back at the very border of the Promised Land some forty years before. They had grown up and grown old in the wilderness, along with younger members of the nation who were born during those days of wandering and had no memory at all of God's dealings with their fathers and grandfathers.

The forty years of wandering are ending, though, and the children of Israel gather on the edge of the Promised Land. The scouts have gone into the land and have returned. All that stands between them and the Promised Land is the natural barrier of the Jordan River. God gives His instructions for the next move in Joshua 3:13:

And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the LORD, the LORD of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, that the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap.

Some of you have seen the Jordan River in modern times, and have noted that it's not much to look at. Water conservation projects have choked back the flow of the river so that it is almost a stream. In biblical times, there were no dams along the river to restrain the flow. The river itself flows from what in the New Testament is called the Sea of Galilee (now called Tiberias) down to the Dead Sea at a rate of about forty feet per mile. It is also a very twisted river, fitting two hundred miles of riverbed into a sixty-five mile stretch. Before the water was restricted, the water flowed along this twisted path so rapidly that it flung mud everywhere, making heaps of mud two to twenty-five feet high.¹ According to the *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, "In any event, more than one Christian, desiring to be baptized in the Jordan River like Jesus, have been happily rescued from the current some miles downstream."² Keep in mind that the swiftness and the fullness of the river varied greatly by season. In the spring, when the snows were melting in the highlands at the river's source, the river was much fuller and swifter than normal, and it was very dangerous.

It is precisely the time of the river's greatest danger that God chooses to lead His people into the Promised Land. God had met with Joshua and shared with him the method He had chosen to use to bring His people into the land. The priests and Levites, with the Ark of the Covenant carried on long poles between them, were to step into the river. At that moment, the river would stop flowing and God's people would cross on dry ground, as their fathers had done at the Red Sea forty years before. We might have thought when we heard this story in Sunday school that stepping into the water was

1 Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 40. Quoting *Atlas of Israel* (2nd [English] ed.) (Jerusalem: Survey of Israel, Ministry of Labor, 1970) 3:4.

2 Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 40.

surely an easy thing to do--it must certainly be much easier to cross some little river than an entire sea, right? But from what we have heard today, we can see that this is going to require great faith on the part of the priests and Levites. Can't you almost see them as Joshua explains to the Levites what they must do?

"Oh, yes, we believe God will open the river!"

"Okay," says Joshua, "who wants to go first?"

Apparently some of them had faith that God would stand by His promise, because there is no hint of hesitation. The next verses record the events like this:

And it came to pass, when the people removed from their tents, to pass over Jordan, and the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people;

And as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water; (for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,)

That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho.

And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan.

They took the step of faith, and God accomplished for them what they could not have thought or imagined or accomplished for themselves in their own way or with their own methods. God did the work as they stepped out in faith.

Now that's the back story for our text today. The very next thing God instructed them to do was to prepare a fitting memorial. One man from each of the tribes of Israel was to choose a stone from the riverbed, and then they were to take those stones and fashion them into a memorial. Joshua speaks to the people in Genesis 4:21-22:

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, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land.

God had told them earlier in the chapter that twelve leaders of Israel, one from each tribe, were to carry a stone out of the bed of the Jordan River; but I find it interesting that the Bible does not record God telling them *why* they were to do so. Joshua understood, though, and he provided the reason to the Israelites: these stones are a memorial for what God has done for us, and we must use them to instruct our children about God's working in our lives.

Here you have the past, this memorial, and the future, the children of generations not yet born, tied together in one point in time, the present. The Israelites were to take the lessons of their past, and in their own present time, they were to pass on those lesson to the future through their children. There is a

very real link here between the past, present and future--a link that is very, very fragile. I'll put my point to you in the form of a question: How long does it take to lose a godly culture? The answer, of course, is always *exactly one generation*. It does not matter if 1 or 10 or 100 godly generations came before; if we do not in the present transmit that legacy to the next generation, all will be lost.

It's a quiet tragedy that takes years within our own lifetimes to play out. Day by day, we allow the stresses and pressures of life to keep us from serving God as we ought to. We fail to consider God in our time, our tithes, our talents, using these for our own seemingly harmless purposes. The neglect is so gradual and so easy that we hardly notice it, until it is too late.

The founders of this land of America knew the importance of educating children religiously. It is about this time of year that we recall the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620 and the hardships that they faced. A larger group, known to us as the Puritans, soon followed them, beginning to arrive in America in 1630. Within five years, they had established a free grammar school in Boston. Education was so important to them that in 1647 they made an act requiring every town of 50 families or more to provide a teacher for the children, and every town of 100 families to establish a free grammar school. The act is known as the "Old Deluder Satan Act" because of the language used in the law, a part of which I will read to you:

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures . . . It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to fifty households shall forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read.

Within six years of the founding of their very first settlement, they founded a school for preachers. You know that school, because it has a world-wide reputation: Harvard College, now Harvard University.

The Puritans wanted their children to be educated *so that* they could read and know the Bible. While I'm not suggesting that the Puritans were right about everything, I am saying that they knew that the past must be transmitted to the future in the present.

What about us? Friends, I assure you that we have teaching opportunities built right into the structure of this church. We look at this beautiful building, this facility, and we have to realize that this place did not build itself. The church was important enough to some people, including some of you who are here today, to dig deep to finance every brick of this building. The original sanctuary was built first, with its choir loft on the left, and the "amen" section on the right, and the baptismal pool under the pulpit area. A big, pot bellied stove ensured that even Baptists would make their way to the front of the church on some occasions, as you can read in the little book you've received today.

By the time the 1950's rolled around, that sanctuary was in need of a makeover. The pastor wanted a brick veneer added to the building, but the architect said that it couldn't be done because the bell tower was pulling the sanctuary to one side. The whole sanctuary needed to be rebuilt. Some people, some of you, in fact, laid out the money for the massive building project, even to the extent of putting a second mortgage on your own homes. In 1955, the new sanctuary was dedicated, and the old bell had a new housing, where it stands to this day, and the whole \$60,000 project was completed debt-free. The church later expanded with additional Sunday school rooms on one side, and then a new fellowship hall on the other. Special offerings paid for an organ in 1984 and stained glass in 1992 and 1994. All of this

speaks of the tremendous generosity of God's people over many decades. These gifts were gifts of love in response to God's goodness to His people here at Waverly Hall Baptist Church.

We see also, everywhere we look, gifts in memory of friends and loved ones. We see this on the windows, for example, but in other places as well. These gifts were given to honor and preserve in a very tangible way the legacy of those who have gone on before us.

We also find relics of the past here, in the form of documents, photos, certificates, and other things that have come down to us from the past. These are reminders of the life of this church over the decades, a life which many of you have shared and known and even directed. Yes, many of you have held positions in this church, and your work here has sent ripples down through the years. Those ripples have spread far and wide, and will continue to have an effect into eternity. We can never, ever realize the full significance of the changes in the lives of those you have touched through your ministry here at Waverly Hall Baptist Church.

It is important, then, that we actively work to preserve and transmit the heritage and history of this building and these artifacts from the past. They are the reminders of the spiritual journeys of those who have gone before, but only if we determine to teach the meanings to the next generation. This building is full of lessons if we will do our part to share those lessons. This building without the meanings attached is just a building. It would be a shame if our children were to ask us, "What mean these stones?" and we had no answer, as if this building were built and paid for by nameless, faceless, soulless creatures.

This all brings me to the greater reality that I wish to share. As much as this building means, and as much as these artifacts mean, their significance pales in comparison to "living stones" of this church. By "living stones," I do not mean just those Christians who are alive with us today; I mean the true biblical sense of 1 Peter 2:5:

Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

This church building is made up of brick and mortar, plaster and paint; and it serves to remind us of many aspects of our spiritual life. However, this building is not the church. Waverly Hall Baptist Church is made up of people--past, present, and future--God's saints joined together for a common purpose and cause that is greater than we ourselves. We share a bond with the founders of this church, with your fathers and mothers and aunts and uncles and children, through the generations to come. These saints are "living stones," who are part of the same spiritual house. We are joined together. We build on and continue the work done by those who have gone before.

I think it would be right to talk about some of the characteristics of these "living stones" who have built and continue to build this church together even now. I want you to know that we have among us a group of saints who have overcome the odds. Did you know that the odds of a marriage breaking up within 15 years is 43%?³ Now let's see something here: how many of you have been married 15 years or longer, or would be if your spouse were still living? Keep your hands up if your marriage has lasted, or would have lasted if your spouse were living, over 30 years; 50 years; 60 years. Yes, we have some

³ National Center for Health Statistics, "New Report Sheds Light on Trends and Patterns in Marriage, Divorce, and Cohabitation." July 24, 2002. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/02news/div_mar_cohab.htm.

people whose marriage has lasted over 60 years. Congratulations to all of you who have stuck with it over the years; you are the very kind of people with whom I want to associate and from whom I want to learn. I want my children to see marriages that have stood the test of time. Some of you were married, and your spouse passed on, and you remarried; and I congratulate you as well, because second marriages fail at a higher rate than first marriages. I thank you all for your testimony. We need look no further than this church for examples of dedication and true love.

This is a church of people who overcome the odds. We have a woman here who has not missed a single Sunday of Sunday school in 44 years. When she traveled, she went to Sunday school. Even if she were in Wisconsin and the snow was so thick on the ground that most churches canceled services, she found a church that was open for Sunday school. Through sickness and bad weather and everything else, she has overcome the odds and maintained perfect attendance. That's someone we can learn from. In addition to that, we have people here who come faithfully even though their bodies are wracked with pain. You can see them here today. We need look no further than this church for examples of steadfast endurance.

We have people here, "living stones," who have been in the worst and most dangerous fighting this world has ever seen and have lived to tell the tale. We have a man who was there at the invasion of Normandy beach, and who was in a foxhole in Korea during the coldest winter on record there. We have a man who was the commander of the largest bomber planes in the sky at that time, and who trained others to perform combat missions. We have at least one man who served this country for over 40 years; and we have a mother who served whose daughter is currently serving in our armed forces. We need look no further than this church for examples of courage.

We have people here who were brought up in this church's Vacation Bible School and Sunday school ministry who then turned around and taught Sunday school. We have people who were raised here as children, who in turn raised their own children here. We need look no further than this church for examples of faithfulness.

As we mentioned earlier, we have people here who have funded this ministry over the years, giving tithes, supplying fund for building projects, investing in Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong offerings, and giving above and beyond measure, trusting God to supply their needs. This entire building is a testimony to their generosity and faithfulness in giving. We need look no further than this church for examples of stewardship.

We have people here who give of themselves daily so much for this ministry that for the sake of their own health I feel at times compelled to throttle them down a bit. Inexhaustible energy like that can only come from inexhaustible love.

I don't know what the odds are of overcoming a trial like that which we experienced recently, during which time we were locked out of the church. I don't know how many groups would survive such an ordeal, which dragged on for several years; but these are the people who have done it. The lessons we learned in those years were painful and purchased at a high price; but the fellowship, the love, and the bonding that we experienced and continue to enjoy are beyond price. We need look no further than this church for examples of Christian unity and purpose.

All in all, we have a group here who have lived day by day the Christian experience, at work, at play, in

service to our country, and in service to the Lord. Any church would be proud to have just one such person in the congregation, but we have a congregation full of them: solid people who have built their lives on the Solid Rock, Jesus Christ.

Friends, let us be intentional about passing on our experience, our memories, our knowledge, our very faith, to the next generation. Let us actively and enthusiastically instruct those who will come behind us and build on the work of our own lifetimes. Let us look on the past, not as a memorial of glory days gone by, but as an inspiration and a pattern for our ministry in the present and future. When our children ask us, "What mean these stones?" let us give them an answer: "These stones are the lives of God's dear saints, preserved for your benefit and blessing--and now it is your turn to build!"