

A Stone Collection

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[0:00] Joshua chapter 4, a week ago, last Thursday, Dawn and I got up early and flew to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

! My dad was raised there, my grandmother lived there, and I wanted to visit some memorable, special locations one more time.

We enjoyed a sunset on Lake Michigan, the first day there, it was absolutely beautiful. And then we drove up the shoreline of western Michigan, lots of lighthouses and pretty sights and port cities, and then on Saturday we enjoyed Mackinac Island as well.

However, we were in the process of making our way up to the Upper Peninsula, what the people who lived there, they called themselves Uppers, called the UP. My dad was stationed at Kincheloe Air Force Base there from 1973 to 1976, and he had previously been stationed at Donaldson Air Force Base, where he met his future bride and married her and traveled around the United States for 20 years and retired in 76, and we got back to the south as quick as we could.

We went back in 1987, and the base had closed in 1977, and they had built a prison on that base as well as an Air Force base, excuse me, an airport, and the housing, and the housing, and the housing, about 1,200 homes were abandoned.

[1:47] They hadn't been for a decade. We went back and walked through the areas that we lived in, and they were all boarded up. And I walked through those woods that I played in.

There were some woods behind my house that I played in. And I recently had this compelling to go back and visit that area one more time.

It's been 40 years, almost 40 years since I'd been in that area. And the underlying reason was a passage that I want to share today that God has worked in my life through.

It's found in Joshua chapter 4, beginning in verse 1. It says this, When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, Take 12 men from the people from each tribe, a man, and command them, saying, Take 12 stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan for the very place where the priest's feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodged tonight.

Then Joshua called the 12 men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to him, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel.

[3:18] That this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, What do these stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to people of Israel a memorial forever. And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded, and took up 12 stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the Lord told Joshua.

And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down there.

And Joshua set up 12 stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood, and they are there to this day.

For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished, that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people passed over in haste.

And when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the Lord and the priests passed over before the people. Skip to verse 19, and it says this.

[4:28] Then people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. And those 12 stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal.

And he said to the people of Israel, When your children ask their fathers in times to come, what do these stones mean? Then you shall let your children know Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over. So that all the people of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.

My compulsion to go back to that area was propelled even more so and put into motion by a comment that Brian made in worship one Sunday morning when he said, We need to go back to the place where God saved us.

Now, I don't remember the exact context of what he said because I kind of zeroed in on that in my mind. But I think what he was saying is that we need to remember when God saved us, and we need to go back in our mind and remember that time and thank God for what he did for us and our salvation.

[5:45] However, that day when I was sitting on the first row and I heard what he said to go back to that spot and thank God for my salvation, I knew that's exactly why I felt propelled to go to the upper peninsula of Michigan one more time was to go back and thank God for my salvation.

I hope you love him today. I hope you surrender your life to him today. And if not, I hope today is the day. If you have given your life to Christ, I hope your life reflects that.

I mean, it'll be imperfect. Chuck Swindoll speaks of going three steps forward and two steps back as the Christian life, and that's true. That's the way it is. We're not perfect in that sense, and the reality is that we sometimes step backwards.

But three steps forward and two steps back, if I do my math right, is a step of progress. And that's what we're to be in our spiritual journey is progressing all the way.

We need to be progressing in the Lord. Our passage today shows us three ways to do that. One is to pursue the promises of God. For 40 years, they wandered in the wilderness.

[6:58] The journey was much longer than it had to be. It was much tougher than it had to be. From Egypt to the edge of the land that they had been promised was about 150 miles.

It should have been a trip that they made in less than two weeks. As a matter of fact, Deuteronomy 1, verse 2 says that it should have been done in 11 days. It instead took 40 years.

Thirty-eight of those years were from Mount Sinai to Canaan. And the reality is it didn't have to be. Have you ever been on a journey that you made longer than it had to be and more difficult than it had to be?

A journey in life? Taking a course of life that was more difficult than it should have been? That you made tougher than it had to be? Of course we have.

And if I were to ask you today, many of you could stand and say, I delayed the fulfillment of some of the promises of God in my life because I took a wayward path. Because I didn't do what God wanted me to do.

[8:03] I didn't follow as God instructed. Today may we be certain that we pursue the promises of God. The greatest promise of God is salvation in Christ.

Romans 10, 9 says if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. So in other words, it's a two-step process.

The context of that passage tells us it's an open confession of our faith. Not a hidden matter, but one that we openly confess that we believe in Christ and want to live for him.

And then we believe in our heart that God had raised him from the dead. And that belief is more than just a belief in a historic Jesus. It's a belief in the real Christ. One that changes our lives.

And the good news is that Romans 10, 13 tells us that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. It's just a promise of God. Let me tell you another promise of God.

[9:02] And that's a daily intake of the word of God shall be a blessing to your life. Psalm 1 tells us in verse 1, Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

And verse 3 talks about the fruit that comes forth from that, the promise that happens. He's like a tree planted by streams of water that yield its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers. How about this promise? Philippians 4, 5 through 7, the Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God.

And listen to what happens. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

That promise tells us that we can quit wallowing around in our anxiety and instead lay that before the Lord and find a peace that passes all of our understanding, that is beyond our circumstances, and I love this, and that guards our hearts and guards our mind.

[10:12] There are many more promises of God that we can pursue. This book is absolutely full of them. Promises about our daily life. Promises about all of eternity. I encourage you to pursue the promises of God.

When you open up God's word, ask him to show you his promises. However, today I want to focus on the second way that we can progress in the Lord. And that is that we can start a stone collection. Start a stone collection. When they crossed over the Jordan on dry land, they were instructed to take a man from each tribe and collect a stone out of that dry bed of the Jordan.

To put that stone on their shoulder. And when they reached Gilgal, to set those stones up as a remembrance of what God had done for them. The purpose was to explain to the next generation what God had done in fulfilling his promises.

Every one of us need to set stones of remembrance in our hearts and in our minds. We need to have points in our life, touch points, that we can go back to and be reminded of all that God has done for us.

[11:26] And that takes me back to my trip. For while we were stationed there on that Air Force Base, we attended a Southern Baptist Church just a few miles off the base.

Faith Baptist Church. It was probably a church that was planted for the Air Force Base. That Air Force Base came up probably for about 30 years during the Cold War to protect us on the Canadian line.

They put another one up just three hours away in Gwynn, Michigan as well. Sawyer Air Force Base. And both of those were there for about that time.

And I found out while I was there that this church was planted. And they got in the car and drove three hours to Gwynn. And they planted First Baptist Church Gwynn.

Both of them right in the shadow of those Air Force bases on the same day. Our pastor was Brother Ray Wolf. We had a very unique opportunity in the 70s.

[12:32] We had a black pastor in an almost all-white church. My dad was a deacon. He is on the far left there.

And my mother played the piano and the organ, not at the same time. But they both sang in the choir. And I stayed behind while they sang in the choir and sat on the back row with Brother Ray Wolf.

And we'd pray together during choir practice. And one of those nights, I prayed to receive Christ. It is my first stone of remembrance.

I call it my stone of salvation. And that is that it's a spiritual marker in my life. A touch base that I can go back to to strengthen my faith.

And this journey was about trying to find the opportunity to go back to that pew and thank God for saving me.

[13:39] Brother Ray Wolf is with the Lord. He's died 10 years ago. But while I was there, I met other people who had been impacted by his life. That church just has a couple of handfuls of people now.

But when I walked in that church last Sunday, I met a man who has kind of presided in that church. Not the pastor. That main deacon.

Probably the deacon. That holds the checkbook of the church in his pocket. And makes sure the lights are on. And makes sure the door. In small churches, sometimes there's that one guy that has to make sure everything flows and goes.

And that was that man, Art was. And Art talked about how long he had been in the church. I said, Art, were you in the church when we were here, when the base was open? And he said, no, I was

lost.

But Brother Ray Wolf shared Christ with me. And he saved me. And he baptized me. Same pool I was baptized in. I said, is there anybody else in the church that was here when Ray Wolf was here? [14:47] He said, Mary was. Mary's in the kitchen. Mary fixes lunch for the church every Sunday. And they have lunch together. We're looking for somebody to do that for us.

After church, I walked back there and spoke to Mary. I said, Mary, I understand you were here when Ray Wolf was here. She said, I sure was. She said, I was Catholic. And he knocked on my door one day and told me, this Sunday you're going to my church. And she said, and I did. And I didn't like it. She said he was loud. And he was wild. Can you imagine such in a Baptist church? She said, so I went back to my church. But she said something was missing. And so the next Sunday, I went back. And Brother Ray led me to the Lord and baptized me in that pool. I looked at the legacy that that man had left. It was powerful to me. That's where I was baptized. [15:53] And that's my second stone on September 30, 1974. That's my stone of confession where I was baptized. Little to nothing has changed at that church.

Very little. In contacting the church, the pastor asked me to share with him, share with him that day. I had a hard time contacting him.

He don't take phone calls. I thought it was personal, but he don't take phone calls. And so I emailed him. And I'd get a response a week later or so. Wasn't sure it was all going to line up.

At first, I just wanted the opportunity to walk in the church just one time and to see that pew and sit down and thank God for it and get up and leave. That's really what I wanted, to just walk through one time, just to go back to that point.

And it reminded me of something very similar that happened to me at the Garden of Gethsemane when I went and visited the Holy Land in 2012. I went to the Garden of Gethsemane. And that's a very impactful passage of Scripture for me when I think about the suffering that the Lord did during that prayer when he took on the cup of God's wrath.

[17:03] Isaiah tells us the cup that he's talking about is the cup of God's wrath and how he surrendered himself to go to the cross and then from there went to the cross. And there's a chapel right there beside the Garden of Gethsemane.

And in that chapel, a rock rises up right where the altar is built. They call it the Rock of Agony. And it's a symbol of what Christ did for us on the cross and where he prayed.

You know, every picture I ever saw of Christ praying in the garden when I was growing up, he's leaning on a rock. And I was looking for that rock when I got to the Garden of Gethsemane. And it's there. It's in the middle of that chapel, the Rock of Agony.

And so I tried to go up through there. And they had a little gate over it and some steps. And I tried to go up and just kneel down and thank God for it. But a lot of other people were standing there. And what I didn't realize was they were about to take Eucharist right there.

And I was interrupting them and didn't even know it. I'm kind of like a bull in a china shop sometimes. And they were kind of elbowing me and trying to get me to move on when it was a crowded spot.

[18:01] And it wasn't exactly what I had in mind to thank God for. So I just kind of backed up and said, Lord, I probably won't be here again. But you know my heart. And I looked over in the corner of the building. And there was a rock formation.

That same rock formation had went into the ground and had come back up and was built into the corner of that room. And I went over there and I knelt down in front of it and put my hand on it. And I said, thank you, Jesus, for the suffering that you endured in the garden and on the cross that brought my salvation.

In much the same way, going back to that pew was something that I wanted to do. And as I tried to contact that pastor and be able to line up a time when he would let me in and let me just go to that spot, he lined it up that I could be there on a Sunday.

And he wanted me to share with his people. And so we lined that up. And when I got to Michigan on Friday, I emailed him, not thinking I'd really get a response.

[19:06] It takes him a while to respond. But he responded to me just a few hours later. And he said, I'm so glad you're coming. If you want to eat lunch with us, let me know. And I'll make sure to tell Mary to make a little more.

And he said, Ann, he said, if your wife can play the piano, then I'll introduce you, give you all the time you want. You can lead the hymns and tell us which hymns are your favorite and why. And then you can speak to us and say whatever you want to. Well, thank you. So we walked in. He must have found the description that you got of me some years ago that must be on the website or something.

He knew more about me than I did. And he spoke of all this stuff. And then he took the offering, sang the doxology and sat down and gave the rest of it to me.

We sang a few hymns, a couple of hymns, and I sang a song, and then I preached. They were amazed by the pictures of the growth from the 70s because it's just a handful of people now.

[20:15] But I wanted to go back and thank God in that place and also to encourage that church because we never know the influence that we may have on somebody. We may not even know the impact that we have.

And the reality is when I look at my life, stones of sanctification are sprinkled throughout my life when God moved mightily. My stone of surrenders in January 30, 1988, when on a Saturday morning I surrendered to the call of God in ministry.

It was a burning bush type experience for me. I'll never forget that day. In the summer of 1992, I went to New Orleans Seminary. That was my stone of commission. I packed everything I had in a Honda Civic and drove 600 miles away from my mama to get my master's degree and prepare for ministry, scared to death.

Another one is January 1933, my stone of proclamation. That was when I was ordained to become a pastor and became a pastor after only being in seminary for six months. On October 28, 1995, my stone of marital sanctity when I married my dear bride.

On March 17, 2000, my first child was born, my stone of jubilation. August 11, 2006, my second child was born, my stone of double blessing. The day my daughters got saved are my stones of thanksgiving.

[21:34] And I have four stones of appreciation, the four churches that I've been allowed to pastor. Last year I had a cardiac arrest, heart attack. Every doctor that came in my room said I was a miracle.

And so I call that my miraculous stone. Listen, friend, you need to have some spiritual memorial stones in your life to set up historical spiritual markers in your life so that you can go back to and you can rest.

And the Old Testament is full of memorial stones. In Genesis chapter 28, God spoke to Jacob in a dream and told him that he would use him mightily. And Jacob awoke, took the rock that he was resting on, and made a memorial stone.

He poured oil on it and called it Bethel, which means the abode or the dwelling or the house of God. This is where God put his hand on me, and he left a mark on me. 1 Samuel chapter 7, verse 12, in the midst of the battle, Samuel looked to God for help.

He then placed a memorial stone, his Ebenezer, which means the stone of help. And there he proclaimed that God had helped him to that point and that they could trust him, that same God, today and tomorrow.

[22:41] Time and time again, memorial stones have been placed. God does not want us to forget his presence. He does not want us to forget his intervention.

And I believe when they were in the middle of that river and God was telling them, I don't want you to forget about Egypt, and I don't want you to forget about slavery, and I don't want you to forget about your situation that I brought you out of.

I don't want you to forget how I helped you cross the Red Sea by the mighty hand of God, how the water stopped to let you cross. I don't want you to forget about the manna that I provide every day. I don't want you to forget about the water from the rock. I don't want you to forget the cloud by day that I led you, the fire by night that I led you. don't forget what God has spoken your heart.

Mark it down. Nail it down. You may need to go back to it, but you can also take others to it and show them what these stones mean.

[23:41] Don't forget when God spoke to your heart. There are corporate stones. God has done wonderful things in the life of this church, and many of those have been laid over the years.

More will be, thank God. There also needs to be personal stones, stones in your life that you can go back to. Maybe today you need to lay down a stone of salvation.

You've never given your heart and life to the Lord. Maybe you need to lay down a stone of repentance. You need to walk away from a pattern that you're walking in. Maybe you need to mark a stone of consecration or lay down a stone of obedience.

Some stones need to be laid down publicly, and I thank God for that. But I also know there's a lot of stones that have to be laid down privately, just between you and God, but you can later share with somebody how God brought you through.

Set stones of remembrance in your life. And lastly, testify so that others will know. Verse 21 says, tell them how God provided for you.

[24 : 45] Tell them how God made a way. Verse 24 says, don't forget the principles of God. Raise your children to know the principles of God. As I often speak of in Deuteronomy chapter 6, as they often spoke of as well.

Teach diligently to your children the word of God. When they get up, when they lie down, when they walk or ride along the way, when you sit at home, let your home, let your life be marked by testimonies of God's faithfulness.

And share that with others. There's power in your story. People love to talk about their story. Let me tell you what ramps up your story that much more. Tell them about how God intervened in your story.

Tell them how God moved and worked in your life. And let those be markers in your life that you go back to and find strength in difficult days, as well as being able to share with us others.

It's interesting to me how God works when we're faithful. I love to go on mission for the Lord. I love to see new places.

[25 : 56] And I love to encourage pastors and missionaries. I love to share Christ with folks and watch people come to know the Lord.

And I love to train pastors as I've done overseas. I love doing those things. But I'll just be honest with you. When I go on a mission trip, when I go on mission, my greatest goal is I want to encourage a pastor.

I want to encourage a missionary. I want to hear their story. I want to come back and share that story with you. I want to find out how we can get involved in what they're doing, where God's working in their life, or how we can encourage them along the way.

I've taken suitcases full of stuff that you can't get in a grocery store in some foreign country, but you can get it in America. And we'd pack a suitcase and take it and leave it with them for missionaries to fight over, bacon and peanut butter and things like that that you just can't get.

I love to be an encouragement to them. But I'll be honest with you, this trip was a personal trip. It's a personal privilege. I just, it's just trained God in me.

[27 : 07] Just for Dawn to walk through those days with me, for me to share some with her, and for us to see some stuff that I hadn't seen. Primarily it was a thank you, Lord trip that I get to share with my wife, revisit old places and see some new.

But something interesting happened. In my efforts to reach a small church with no social media presence and a pastor that refuses to answer the phone, I contacted the Baptist Convention of Michigan by email.

I contacted their executive director. After I didn't hear from him for a couple days, I contacted the one on staff who was responsible for taking care of pastors. And after a couple days after that, I contacted a church planner that I know that plants churches in Detroit.

We were on Midwestern Seminary's board together for several years. And I know Wayne from that. So I contacted him. He got back with me and gave me a good number and gave me an email.

And I began to contact. But one Saturday morning, I opened my email and looked. And the executive director of Michigan, Ed Epperling, had emailed me back and said, I've heard about your trip.

[28 : 30] And I want to know more. Will you call me? And so I called him. And we talked. And he said, Michigan Baptists need to hear this story.

They need to know that they influence people that they may never even know this side of eternity. He said, I'd love for them to hear your story. When you fly into Grand Rapids, would you be willing to meet me and let me interview you?

And do you mind if a videographer meets at your church, meets at that church on that Sunday at Faith Baptist and videos that?

Because I want to see you on that pew. So when we flew into Grand Rapids, we drove to Granville to Redemption Church.

Ed's in the black shirt. His son-in-law is a videographer. We sat down in that lobby. And after lunch and talking some, I shared my story, what the impact of those days meant to me and how I wanted to go back and thank God for what he had done.

[29:45] When we got to the church on Sunday, there was a videographer there. And he videoed some of what happened that day. And they'll put that presentation together.

And when they do, if I get a copy of it, I'll share it with you. But I also saw another man there. He had a Michigan Baptist quarter zip on.

And he walked up to me and told me who he was and told me that Ed had been traveling through the UP encouraging the churches. There are six or seven Southern Baptist churches in the UP. He is a part of one of them. And he said, Ed told us your story. And Ed told me that as he went across the UP, he found out more people that knew Ray Wolf.

As a matter of fact, a church planter up there actually did the funeral for Ray Wolf in Lansing, Michigan 10 years ago. And Darrell came and said, I heard about your story.

[30:52] I wanted to visit this church to try to help the churches work together better. And I thought, what better Sunday than the one you're coming? He said, I've watched you online. I've heard you preach.

And I just wanted to meet you and be here today. He came down and sat on the second row, put his iPad on the front row and videoed the whole service. When the service was over, I was speaking to folks.

And he was standing in the back of the church right there. And I walked up to him. He had tears in his eyes. And he said, our church has been through transition.

And I'm helping another fellow right now. He preaches one week. I preached the next week. I preached last week. I'll preach next week. I took this day to drive, three hours to be here.

He said, but I realized today that I need to lay down a stone of commitment. That I need to go and lead that church. And do what God's calling me to do.

[31:53] I thought it was interesting. Here I am taking a personal trip. Personal privilege. And yet God has a way of using that to help others along the way.

That is exactly why he told us to leave those stones behind. Do you need to lay down a stone today?

I'm not talking about a physical stone. Although the one that's on the front of the bulletin is one that was in the woods behind my house when we lived on base that I used to climb up on. Now I can sit on it.

It's a huge boulder. And it's a symbol for me of stones. I mean, if I could have packed that thing up and took it home, I would have. But I think it would have been overweight. What stone do you need to lay down today before the Lord?

Have you ever given your heart and life to the Lord Jesus? I don't mean have you affiliated with the church or have you went through some process with the church. I mean, has there ever been a personal commitment of your life to follow Christ?

[33:08] Has there been a change in your life? Because the reality is if there's not been a change in your life, there's not been a change in your life. Have you ever given your life to Christ?

If you have done that, have you ever publicly acknowledged that through baptism? As I read a little while ago with the Great Commission, Jesus is the one that promoted that idea. And the need for us to publicly confess our faith.

And if you've never done that as a believer, I want you to know it's a stumbling block for you. It can be a hindrance to you being everything that God would have you to be. Because it's a point of obedience that we need to pass.

Maybe it's something else. I realize there are some things that need to be public. And I realize there are some things that need to be private. But either way, I can't help but think that today there may be one who needs to say, today is the day when God has spoke to my life, made a change in me, and I want to go back to this day.

And one day in time, I want to be able to share it with other people, what God has done for me. What kind of stone do you need to lay down? Maybe you just need to go home and think about what stones ought to be in your collection.

[34 : 27] Maybe you've not reflected on that enough lately. I'll tell you, it will get you through the treacherous times when you can realize God's been there in the past. He'll be there now.

I can rest in Him. I don't know what God's telling you to do. I know what He told me to do. I just encourage you to be obedient and follow Him in whatever way. I'm here to help.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, I love you and I thank you for the love that you have for us. And I ask, dear God, that as we stand in just a moment and sing, that, Lord, you will lead and work in our lives to do exactly what you called us to do, Father, that we'll respond in obedience as you speak to our hearts and lives.

Lord, I pray in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Amen. Amen.