



“You’ve Gotta Have The Stones”

Text: Joshua 4:1-9

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: ‘Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, “Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.”’ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial for ever.’ The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle 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.)

1. The End is the Beginning

A Baccalaureate Ceremony is a service which honors the graduating senior class, and is often of a religious nature.

I know this because Wikipedia told me so.

Wikipedia also informed me that the baccalaureate addresses can range in length from under half an hour to as long as four hours...but in the interests of keeping this on the shorter side, I’ve decided to jump right to the end of the speech. (That way if you get bored during the middle of it you can just skip out when you want to or slip in some earbuds or something.)

So we begin with tonight’s conclusion, which I arrived at by way of asking some questions:

- *When you walk across that stage, diploma in hand, how are you going to make your way?*
- *How are you going to face the uncertainties of the future, with all of its unforeseen challenges and hidden costs and temptations?*
- *What is it going to take for you to act on your faith in Christ, to trust in God and his promises, and to live your life accordingly?*

In the end, I think it boils down to **whether or not you’ve got the stones.**

If you **don’t have** the stones, years from now, you’re going to find that you’ve spent a lot of precious time wandering around aimlessly because of fear - fear that comes from not trusting in God’s guidance, God’s providence, God’s grace and redemption.

If **you’ve got** the stones, you’re going to trust that God is with you, and you’re not going to be afraid to take the bull-by-the-horns, to follow God’s call in your life no matter where it takes you or what it costs.

2. Some Faith Stories

...So much for the conclusion. Now, let me go back and explain what I mean about *stones*.

You see, all through the Bible there God tells us how we ought to live our lives. “The just live by faith” yells the prophet Habakkuk. In 2 Timothy 1:7, Paul writes, “For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind.”

In the Bible there are tons of examples of people and groups of people who make the choice to trust God or not, and we get to learn from their example. Adam and Eve let themselves be confused by the serpent in the garden, and so they were persuaded that God did not really mean what he said, or that perhaps they misunderstood what he said, or maybe even he hadn’t said anything in particular. They ate the forbidden fruit because they did not trust God, and now we’re all stuck in a fallen world because of it.

Later on, Noah trusted God and built an ark. According to Genesis, there had never been any rain before, so building a boat because there’s going to be a massive flood must have taken a heck of a lot of faith. But Noah did it. And because of his trust in God our species survived a great cataclysm.

Abram was living the good life in Ur of the Chaldees (a pretty big city at the time) but God told him to pack up and move to some foreign land. Because he believed and did as God told him to, God blessed him. His name was even changed to Abraham (which means “father of many nations”). His very name represents the amount of trust he had with God - Abraham didn’t have any children! He was close to 100 years old and still didn’t have any children; yet because he trusted God, Sarah bore him a son, Isaac.

Then God tested him and told him to take Isaac up a mountain and sacrifice him. Abraham didn’t *want* to do this. Isaac was the son God gave him. If God promised to make him a father of many nations, how was that supposed to happen if Isaac was killed?

You see how easy it is to doubt? There are good reasons to doubt God, for sure.

But what did Abraham do?

He trusted God. He said “where God guides, He provides,” and sure enough, God provided a lamb to be sacrificed and Isaac lived.

What is it Jesus always says to the sick and the lame, the blind and the paralyzed, the people who need miraculous healing? “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” All through his ministry, Jesus did amazing works. Blind people. People who couldn’t walk. Deaf people. People possessed with demons. Jesus performs miracles when the people trust in him. Not when they want him to prove he’s God. Not when they want to see cool magic tricks. Jesus heals the ones who trust him.

You see the point here? There’s a fundamental question that everyone is faced with, and that question is: *Will you trust in God? Will you lean on him and furiously hold on to his words even in the face of what life throws at you?*

3. (Not) Entering The Promised Land

The people of Israel had just spent 400 years in slavery to the Egyptians. Moses led them out from Egypt after God sent the 10 plagues. God did another mighty work by parting the waters of the Red Sea. God further showed himself to the Israelites by becoming a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. He led them in this way to Mt. Sinai, where he gave them an identity as his people, he gave them a purpose, he gave them a promise.

In Deuteronomy, chapter 30, God reminds the people of Israel, “see, today I have set before you life and good, death and evil.” He says if you love me, obey me by walking in my ways, and by keeping my commandments and rules, and then you shall live and multiply, and be blessed. But if your heart turns away, if you refuse to trust in me, then life will be more of a curse. The choice is between a life of faith - that is, trust - in God, and a life of mistrust and pride and fear.

Through supernatural acts God shows the Israelites that he is able to do all things, and that they need only to trust in him. And in this manner he is going to bring his people back into the land he promised to, Abraham. So off they go, through the desert right up to the border. Moses says to them, “You have come to the country which the Lord our God is giving us. See the Lord your God has set the land before you. Go up, take possession, as he has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

But then they stop. They convince Moses to let them send in spies to check out the land to see what kind of defenses the inhabitants have set up, whether or not they’re expecting an invasion, and where Israel might best press their advantage. The spies come back and report to the Israelites.

“This land is full of giants. We don’t stand a chance. Let’s not go in there.”

Now they’ve got the excuse they wanted to be afraid, the kind of fear that turns us from trusting God. Just like Adam and Eve, the 12 tribes of Israel who were brought out of slavery from Egypt became ensnared by Satan’s oldest and best trick: They allowed fear to rule them. Fear that maybe what God said was going to happen wasn’t going to happen. Fear that maybe it wasn’t God that said it but Moses. Fear that maybe this was all a big mistake, leaving the comforts of Egypt to go and be slaughtered by giants. And guess what happened to them?

They spent the next 40 years in the wilderness, wandering about aimlessly, without purpose.

Because they didn’t trust in God’s promises, they were overcome with fear. They were so afraid that they actually preferred living as nomads in the desert to entering the Promised land.

After that 40 years in the wilderness, after almost everyone from that generation had died off, God gave the next generation another chance to trust his promises.

4. Crossing The Jordan

Here's where tonight's reading jumps in: The nation of Israel is once again set to cross the Jordan River and enter into Canaan, the Promised Land.

God tells Joshua to stop everybody from wading across and has them wait. The priests from the tribe of Levi are to take the ark of the covenant and wade into the middle of the river and stand there. Once they do this, God stops the river from flowing and the riverbed becomes dry. (This is a not-too-subtle reminder to the Israelites of God's omnipotence. They probably grew up with their uncles and aunts bragging to them about when Moses parted the Red Sea and they all walked across. Now it's the younger generation's turn to marvel at God's awesome power.)

God tells Joshua to do something else, too. He says to have one representative from each of the twelve tribes come and pick up a stone from the dry riverbed. They are to take that stone with them back to their tribes and keep them as a memorial.

Joshua 4:19-24

The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, 'When your children ask their parents in time to come, "What do these stones mean?" then you shall let your children know, "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground." For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever.'

The memorial stones are a tangible reminder to the Israelites of a time in their history when God acted on their behalf, and did so miraculously. They are more than that, though: They are a symbol of the promises spoken to the people by God. A God that does not lie or change his mind, a God that allows no one to take His place in our hearts, a God who loves jealously all His children and tries every which way to encourage them to walk the path of faith.

What **you** need to do is look back on your life and think of the times when God was there. If you need a stone or a photograph or an entry in a diary or a souvenir or a piece of jewelry or some kind of tangible thing to mark that period, so be it. The point is not to become attached to a physical object but to use it as a device for remembering how near God is to you.

As human beings just like the Israelites, sometimes we are weak and all too easily turn from our faith if we don't have reminders. God knew this ahead of time so he got a bunch of prophets and scribes together to write down literally hundreds of reminders in a book for us. Open it up sometime and you'll find all kinds of stones and memorials and signs and wonders and prophecies that point us to God and encourage us to live our lives trusting in Him.

5. You've gotta have the stones

If you are going to succeed in this life, you can't be afraid of achieving what God has called you to do. You can't be afraid of claiming his Promises to you as yours.

At this point in your life, you're like the children of Israel standing at the Jordan River, looking across to the other side at the Promised Land. You can be like that first generation, who got discouraged and turned away from the purpose God had called them to. You can abandon your trust in his guidance or his mercy or his providence or his grace. Maybe you'll find yourself sometime in a situation where you think you just don't have the courage to go where God's leading you. Maybe you'll be tempted to think you just don't have the stones to do what it takes. But don't be like that. Let me encourage you to be like that second generation of Israelites, the ones who crossed a river with dry sandals, and took stones from the riverbed to prove it. The ones who trusted God when he told them, "Go and take possession because I have given it to you."

When you walk across that stage, diploma in hand, how are you going to make your way? How are you going to face the uncertainties of the future, with all of its unforeseen challenges and hidden costs and temptations? What is it going to take for you to act on your faith in Christ, to trust in God and his promises, and to live your life accordingly?

In the end, I think it boils down to whether or not you've got the stones. If you've got the stones, you're going to trust that God is with you, and you're not going to be afraid to take the bull by the horns, to follow God's call in your life no matter where it takes you or what it costs.

Friends, the rest of your life is like the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, full of adventures and challenges, ripe with opportunities and infinite potential. I won't lie to you: the land you see before you is occupied territory. There will be dangers. There will be hardships. There will be temptations and sins and the awful, horrible consequences of those sins.

What you need to do is to trust God.

Think on what he's done in your life and in the lives of those around you. Think on what he's done in the lives of his people. Take note and remember that God Almighty does not sit idly by. He is personally involved in your story. His word is true. Hear him. Trust him. Go and cross the river with full confidence in Him, knowing that he will continue to lead you and provide for you when you get to the other side.

If you need to, when you leave tonight, find a stone in the driveway or from the school track. One that you can keep as a reminder of how God has done so much already - through your parents, your teachers, your coaches, your friends. Even through your rivals and people who made life hard for you. Keep a stone in your pocket. When you pull it out, remind yourself that the people and places and events in your life have been put there by God to draw you to faith in him.

Trust him and follow him the rest of your life. After realizing all that he's brought you through up to this point, I think you'll find that you've got the stones to do it.