

CELEBRATING THE WORD OF GOD_1

What Do These Stones Mean?

Every nation has its memorials. You go to Washington, D.C. and you find many memorials. You go to London. It's full of memorials. Memorials not only look back but they encourage us with the future. They tell us that the victories of the past become the basis for victories of the future.

Throughout the Old Testament God wanted Israel to have memorials.

If you have your Bibles I want you to turn today to Joshua 4, and we can see here that God wanted Joshua to build a memorial. Chapter 4 of Joshua reads, "When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, 'Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, "Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.'" Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, '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, 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 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 the people of Israel a memorial forever.' (Verse 8) And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded." And when we get to verse 9 we discover that there is a second memorial. This is the one that Joshua put up in the middle of the river. "And Joshua set up twelve 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." By *this day* we mean that they were still there when the book of Joshua was written.

So we have two memorials - one memorial in the Jordan River and the other memorial at a place called Gilgal just beyond the banks of the Jordan River.

Moody Church was founded in 1864 but this building that we are in is the fourth location of the Moody Church, and when

this building was dedicated in 1925, the man who preached here was a man by the name of Philpott, a Canadian. He preached here. It was under his ministry that this structure was built - this beautiful sanctuary, and he preached on this text, *What Do These Stones Mean?* It was the first message ever preached from this pulpit.

And then Pastor Wiersbe, 50 years later, in 1975 preached a message on this text, *What Do These Stones Mean?* And I've benefited from both of their sermons, and so now today I preach on the topic, *What Do These Stones Mean?* on the 150th anniversary of the Moody Church, celebrating the joy of changed lives since 1864.

God says, "When the children ask what these stones mean, you are to tell them about the miracles that God has done." What are the things that we should think of that in the mind of Joshua they would have thought of as they crossed the Jordan River? Well, first of all, of course, these stones were a memorial to the faithfulness of God because this generation, as previous generations, had first of all experienced the power of God. You remember under Moses the nation went over the Red Sea, and they crossed through the Red Sea on dry land, and their feet were not even muddy,

and God did the very same thing for Joshua. You'll notice that the text tells us that when they came across the Jordan River it was on dry ground. God held back the waters of the Jordan River, a miracle for the old generation, and a new similar miracle for the new generation. They'd seen the power of God.

But also they had seen the faithfulness of God in such things as the care of God. In Deuteronomy 8, the Lord asks the question as to what they will do when they get into the land, and the Lord says very clearly, "When you get in the land remember the way in which the Lord your God led you." He said, "Your clothes did not wear out." He said, "I fed you with manna, I fed you with food and I protected you." In Joshua's day they had seen all of that in the desert as they wandered around for 40 long years.

Here's a word of encouragement to those of you who may be living with the second best because of bad decisions that you've made, and you are feeling the consequences of those bad decisions. That was really Israel in the desert because they weren't supposed to wander around there. It's because of their rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea. That's why they were wandering. That's why they were there in the desert, and

yet God was providing for them. He was feeding them. He was protecting them and caring for them. God will do that for you no matter how badly you've messed up your life if you turn to Him right where you are.

Now about in the year 1858 a man by the name of Dwight L. Moody began a Sunday school here in Chicago that was in one of the worst districts of Chicago. Today that district is near the lakefront with high-rise buildings, but in Moody's day it was a terrible place that I'll tell you about sometime. And Moody began there, and Moody should have failed by any reasonable standard. Here was a man who had about a grade 4 education. He couldn't read very well. Sometimes he skipped words when he read the Bible because he wasn't able to pronounce them.

He would go on not only to begin a Sunday school but also to begin a church and begin a school, and eventually to preach to 20,000 people every night for six weeks in London. He should have failed, but the reason Moody experienced such a great blessing of God is he knew something about the power of God that has been a part of Moody Church all these years, celebrating the joy of changed lives. There's nothing like God taking the human

heart and changing it through the new birth. And so he experienced the power of God, and that's been a part of our heritage.

He also experienced the care of God. Moody Church has experienced the care of God. We don't take for granted the fact that after 150 years the same gospel that Moody preached back then is the same gospel that is still preached from this pulpit today. That is a tribute to the faithfulness of God.

When I was installed here at the Moody Church as senior pastor 34 years ago this month (Time goes by when you are having fun, doesn't it? It goes by quickly.) Dr. Walvoord of Dallas Theological Seminary was here to give the address, and he made this interesting statement that I still remember. He said that throughout Moody Church's long history there is no pastor that ever occupied this pulpit who anyone ever suspected of liberal theology. Now that's a tribute to God because in the early 1920s many churches that were older were falling under the weight of liberal theology which was taking over America at an alarming rate. And so people began to doubt the authenticity of the Word of God, and whether or not Jesus was the only way to the

Father. Throughout Moody Church's long history God has preserved this place so that the same message of the Gospel would still be proclaimed here. (applause) And today we gather together to celebrate the faithfulness of God in His care for this place.

Can you imagine this? So far as we know, there has never been a single Sunday in Moody Church's history (including last Sunday when we had that terrible snowstorm) when there wasn't a worship service on a Sunday. Now if you do the math, and I had to figure this out without a pocket calculator so I had to do it two or three times, that's 7,800 Sundays. Can you imagine that? 7,800 Sundays! Every Sunday for 150 years Jesus Christ has been exalted and worshiped in the Moody Church. And God has taken care of us in ways that we'll never even know about until we get to heaven.

One day in the early 1980s I walked into my study, which has a bathroom off of it, and I opened the medicine cabinet. I don't remember why. Maybe it was to get a toothbrush, but I noticed that it was absolutely hot. The metal was fairly burning, and then I smelled smoke, and smoke was coming out of it. Of course I called the

maintenance people immediately. They shut off the electricity because there was a short that was happening in the wall just behind the medicine cabinet. What if I hadn't opened it? Who knows what might have happened? Could you imagine a fire that would have destroyed everything except the shell of this building? God has protected us in ways that we don't even know about, and today we are here 150 years after Moody Church was founded to celebrate the faithfulness of God. (applause)

But we're also here to celebrate the people of God. Your Bibles are open, aren't they? Would you turn back to chapter 3? You'll notice it says these words in verse 7. "And the Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel that they may know that as I was with Moses so I will be with you.'" You know I like the King James Version. It says, "I am going to magnify you in the presence of all Israel."

We make no apology for the fact that today we honor someone whom God was pleased to magnify in the 1800s by the name of Dwight L. Moody. God raises up leaders. They become our example. They guide us. They direct us. God was with Joshua. God was with D.L. Moody, and that's why next week

I'm going to preach about his life because God magnified D. L. Moody in the presence of all of America and all of Great Britain in a way that is astounding.

And so you see we're going to celebrate the people of God. But isn't it interesting (I read the text.) that it says that when it came to building the memorial God said, "Choose a man from every one of the tribes and each man will carry this stone on his shoulder to build the memorial," because when it comes to building the memorial, you never build it alone. A memorial is always built in community. A memorial is always built by a group. Do we know the names of the people who carried these stones? No, they are not given, but the reason that Joshua could be successful is because of the thousands of unnamed people who carried stones, and God says, "I want you to build the memorial together."

When you look at the history of the Moody Church you realize that D. L. Moody is the man that we honor often times, and rightly so, but he had a lot of people carrying stones for him. Arguably Moody Bible Institute would not exist today were it not for Emma Dreyer, because there were times when Moody was so tired of the conflict and the agony

that happened when Moody Bible Institute was begun, he wanted to give up the project but she wouldn't let him. She carried stones for D. L. Moody.

The history of Moody Church is thousands of unnamed people carrying stones. I think for example of the different locations that Moody Church has been at, and this beautiful sanctuary dedicated in 1925. I think of the sacrifices of unknown people who gave and who slaved. There were people who sat across the way in Lincoln Park, watching the building go up, and praying. You see they are ones whose names we don't know. We know a few people, but the thousands of people who have been a part of Moody Church for 150 years are the ones who are carrying stones, and it is because of them that today we can have a memorial that says D. L. Moody's ministry continues today. It's because of the faithfulness. It's a community project. It's a church project that we have, and so today Moody Church is made up of ushers and parkers and Sunday School workers and those who give generously, and prayer warriors, and those who take care of the nursery, and a hundred different volunteer projects - people carrying stones, oftentimes unrecognized, nameless so far as the world is concerned. But it is because of them that we are here today to

celebrate this memorial and to give glory to God.

And so what are we going to do during the next months? Well we are going to celebrate, first of all, the faithfulness of God. Secondly, we are going to celebrate the people of God. But also and more importantly, and what really excites me, we are going to celebrate the presence of God.

In chapter 3, verse 7 (I read it just a moment ago.) the Lord God makes this interesting statement. He says to Joshua, "As I was with Moses, I will be with you." The presence of God! Let me ask you today, what is it that binds history together? Why is it that Henry Ford was wrong when he said that history was just one blank thing after another? And he filled in the blank, and I won't. What is it that gives it the glue, that makes sense of the whole, the continuity? It is the presence of God.

It excites me to think that the same Holy Spirit who converted the Apostle Paul on the way to Damascus is the same Holy Spirit who converted D. L. Moody. He's the same Holy Spirit who converted me as a boy when I was growing up in Canada. He's the same Holy Spirit who has converted you. He is now converting people who are going to give

leadership to this church in the future. He is the one who is going to give continuity. And when the children of Israel were there facing the city of Jericho, it wasn't enough that Moses had seen a miracle. They had to see a miracle. They had to see one for themselves in their situation. And God is not out of miracles, and God is not out of men. God continues history from one generation to another. The sign behind me says it all - *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever*. Aren't you glad that that is the case? (applause)

What is it that binds history together? What binds history together is the presence of God, but also the Word of God. What does the Bible say about the Word of God that binds things together? It says, "The grass withers, the flower of the field fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever," and that's why we celebrate the Word of God. That's why January is dedicated to celebrating the foundation stone ultimately of the Moody Church, which is the Word of God.

Many things have changed since the days of D. L. Moody but there are some things that haven't changed. I could give you a long list of some things that haven't changed since

the days of D. L. Moody. One thing that hasn't changed is that people are still slaves to their sin if they don't choose Jesus as their redeemer. One thing that hasn't changed is that Jesus is the only way to the Father. One thing that hasn't changed is the fact that Jesus Christ is going to return again and there's going to be a final judgment. And one of the things that has not changed is that we continue to send missionaries to the ends of the earth. There are many things that have not changed, and what binds them all together is the Word of God, which lives and abides forever, and goes from one era to the next, from one generation to the next generation. The Word of God has not changed. And that's why we celebrate the presence of God. "As I was with Moses," God said, "I am with you." As I was with D. L. Moody, so I am with you.

Let's think about this a little bit more. What are the implications for us today standing here at this very pivotal time of history, looking back, but also looking forward? The fact is that history is not simply a tombstone. History is actually a stepping-stone. It is a tombstone, but it's also a stepping-stone.

You know, oftentimes we as students thought that history

was boring. How I remember as a schoolboy, in perhaps the third or fourth grade, holding up my history text and reciting the famous words, "If this world should flood, and waters rise so high, I'd stand upon this book because it is so dry." (laughter) Why did we as students think that? It's because history wasn't taught very well. It was taught as a tombstone. "So-and-so lived. They did this. They died. So-and-so lived. They did this. They died." It wasn't taught with all of its lessons and all of its implications.

Can we look again at those two memorials that were set up? First of all, Joshua set up that memorial in the middle of the Jordan River. What is it a symbol of? It's a symbol of death. It's a symbol of the fact that the history is past. They can't go back to the time of Moses. If they had wanted to go back to the time of the wilderness, why then indeed those stones would have cried against them. "The Jordan is flowing. You can't step in the same river twice. You can't go back."

But the memorial at Gilgal pointed toward the land that they were to inherit. That monument pointed toward the future. What was in their future? What was in the land that they had inherited? Well, first of all, Bethlehem was there

in the land and there, centuries later, a redeemer would be born. There was Jerusalem just across the way. Some went ahead of them. There was Jerusalem where the Redeemer would be crucified.

Let me ask you a question. Did Joshua know that? Of course he didn't. It would be centuries. At least if you do the math it would be six or seven centuries later that the prophet Micah would write that out of Bethlehem the Redeemer was to come. They had no clue that that was going to happen. They didn't know that Jesus was going to be crucified outside of the city that would be captured by David and called Jerusalem. They had idea.

In the very same way you and I never know how much God has planned for us, nor do we see the connectedness of events so far as our future is concerned. We don't see what God is up to in the big picture. We see only the challenges of today. We see our Jericho's, and we see our Ai's where the people lost men because of disobedience. That's what we see, but God has a much larger picture in mind that He never reveals to us.

Now think about our situation here. We can't go back to the

past. We can't redo Moody's Sunday school ministry, but we can have our own children's ministry, which, incidentally, has been thriving during the last few years. We can't go back to the big crusades that Moody had. That was a special giftedness. That was a special time. But every one of us listening to this message today can learn and take advantage of the opportunities to learn how to evangelize so that thousands of people in Chicago and beyond can hear a clear presentation of the Gospel. And the Gospel can continue to go out nevertheless.

We can't go back to a culture in which there was a Christian consensus. We can't do that, but we know that as God was with Moody, and his needs and his challenges, so God is with us today. And why can't we believe God for great things here at The Moody Church this year? Why can't we believe that through this ministry marriages are going to be put together that are on the rocks because we sense the power of God through reconciliation and forgiveness? Why can't we expect to hear the cry of newborn babes in a spiritual nursery as men and women come to saving faith in Jesus Christ? Why can't we be more effective in pushing against the darkness, pushing the kind of Word of God that does something in the lives of people and brings about

transformation? Why can't we have a membership that is wholly devoted and committed? Why can't we meet our financial obligations so that we can continue to send even more missionaries to the ends of the earth?

All that is possible, but you see we need our own miracles. We need our own presence of God. We can't go back to the past, but we learn from the past. And because we learn from the past we are excited to embrace our future because "As I was with Moses, and as I was with Moody, so I am with you today."

Moody Church, if we're up to the task in terms of our commitment and faith, God can still do among us the same kind of thing that we often read about and think about in the past.

But you know, I want you to think for a moment not about the legacy of Moody Church right now, but we'll be talking about that especially when we have our legacy dinner on May 9th. And even before that we'll talk about the legacy of Moody Church. Can I speak with you briefly today about your very own personal legacy? You see God said to Joshua, "I'm giving you a legacy. Moses was faithful. Moses passed this

on to you, and now you have the responsibility of passing on what God has given you through Moses to the next generation.”

I think of my own life and I think of the marvelous legacy I have through godly Christian parents who are in heaven today. But you’ve been given a legacy. If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior somebody introduced you to Christ. It may have been your parents. It may have been some other person. It may have been that somebody led you to a Bible study or a church.

Some way you have a legacy, and someday we are going to give account to God for our own legacy, our own personal legacy. And that’s why we want each of you to have a memorial stone. I have one in my pocket, which I have just pulled out, and I might say that these are real stones. These aren’t some kind of plastic creations. These are the real deal, and because these are real stones, every one of them is shaped a little differently. But the good news is it doesn’t matter what memorial stone you get because they all have the same words on them, and I read the words on my memorial stone, which is the same, of course, as what will be on your memorial stone. My memorial stone says,

Joshua 4:6

What will my legacy be?

The Moody Church

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Now this memorial stone has been on my desk for nearly two weeks. Every time I see it, it speaks to me. Sometimes it almost shouts because I am confronted with the legacy that I will leave with my children and with my grandchildren and perhaps even beyond, and I say to myself, "What will my legacy be?"

We want you to have a stone like this, and I want you to think about doing this new year what I'm going to do, namely to write a legacy letter. Now the legacy letter should contain what you want to pass on to the next generation. You say, "Well you know I haven't lived up to any legacy very well." Well then, confess it in the letter. Simply say, "I haven't lived up to this myself but in retrospect I wish I had known this is my legacy."

Everybody write a legacy letter. In a couple of weeks you should be able to say to your friend who is sitting next to you in church today, "How's your legacy letter coming?" You

can ask me that. I've been thinking about it but I haven't written my legacy letter yet.

So when you think of this stone, think of legacy. Think of letter, and have it in a place where you can see it, hopefully every day. And by the way, speaking of legacy letters, if you don't have children, you certainly are friends with some family that has children. Write a legacy letter to someone who is younger than you are. Some of us would find that very, very easy to do with plenty of people to choose from. So have it where you can see it. And then if someone should ask, "What does this stone mean?" this is the answer that you give him or her. "It's a memorial stone. It reminds me that I have been given a legacy, and it reminds me of the fact that I have to leave a legacy. So it makes me ponder the question, which I need to answer, 'What will my legacy be?'"

Some of you listening may be pondering divorce. Do you really want that to be a part of your legacy? Some of you may be involved in dealings that are dishonest. Do you want that to be part of your legacy? What is it that people will remember, and how can you and I enhance our legacy that we have been given, and how can we pass it on to the next

generation? This is my legacy stone and I want all of you to have one.

Let's take a final look at these two different memorials. I told you that the one in the river represents death. You can't go back to the past. I wonder if maybe, however, it may not only represent death as such but it may represent the death of Jesus Christ. And the memorial stone, which was on the riverbank at Gilgal, represents His resurrection because, as I think about Jesus, I realize that He left us two legacies. He left us the legacy of the cross where He died, and then He gave to us the legacy of the empty tomb. And what Jesus was saying by giving us that legacy is "I have done all the work that is necessary for you to be reconciled to God." Jesus gave to us a lesson, and He gave to us a message that we can proclaim to a world that has lost its way, to people who are oftentimes unaware of their great spiritual need.

But Jesus said, "I have a message that will reconcile you to God." In fact, even now as I am speaking, some of you don't know God personally. You have never come to Jesus Christ. He is the Savior of the world and He proved it when He was raised from the dead for our justification. So He

says, "I'm giving you a legacy. I am giving you myself. I'm giving you My victory to proclaim to a world that thinks there are no victories. No matter your sin, no matter your situation, Jesus is adequate for it because He gave us a powerful legacy, but He said, "Pass it on to the next generation. Go into all the world and preach the Gospel." And you and I have our worlds where we should be preaching and proclaiming the Gospel.

When William Williams wrote the song *Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah*, what he was thinking of when he got to the third stanza was Jesus Christ and His work, and he likened Canaan unto heaven. That's why he wrote these words:

When I cross the mighty Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Bear me through the swelling current,
Take me safe to Canaan's side.

In the end the legacy that Jesus Christ left us is not for this world. It's that we might arrive safely in the world to come, and there is nobody except Jesus who can do that. Having been given a legacy, what will my legacy be? That's the question that I want you to answer.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Our Father, as we stand here today we are well aware that we are standing on the shoulders of thousands of faithful people. We are not here by our own strength. We did not arise out of nowhere. We came from a history. We thank you for that history, and even though we can't go back, we thank you today that the future is ahead of us. And because we honor the future and remember it, we can embrace the past because we believe it will inspire us for the future. Oh Father, what a legacy individually and corporately! Thank you for the memorials that have been built throughout these many decades. And we ask that many will come to saving faith in Christ because He is the Savior and has left us a legacy. We thank You for Him. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.