

Israel Remembers God's Deeds

Devotional Reading: [Luke 8:35–39](#)

Background Scripture: [Exodus 14](#); [Joshua 3:1–4:24](#)

[Joshua 4:14–24](#)

¹⁴ That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him all the days of his life, just as they had stood in awe of Moses.

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Joshua, ¹⁶ “Command the priests carrying the ark of the covenant law to come up out of the Jordan.”

¹⁷ So Joshua commanded the priests, “Come up out of the Jordan.”

¹⁸ 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 their place and ran at flood stage as before.

¹⁹ On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. ²⁰ And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. ²¹ He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ²² tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ ²³ For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. ²⁴ 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.”



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Key Text

“In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ ”—Joshua 4:21b–22

Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem

Unit 1: From Nomadic Tribes to Settled People

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe Joshua’s act of remembrance at Gilgal.
2. Compare the Israelites’ crossing of the Jordan River to their crossing of the Red Sea ([Exodus 14](#)).
3. Make a plan to remember God’s acts of faithfulness.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Monuments of Memory
- B. Lesson Context

I. God’s Proclamation (Joshua 4:14)

- A. Joshua’s Reputation (v. 14a)
- B. People’s Reaction (v. 14b)

II. God’s Provision (Joshua 4:15–18)

- A. Commanding the Priests (vv. 15–17)
- B. Carrying the Ark (v. 18)

III. God’s Promises (Joshua 4:19–24)

- A. Sacred Ground (v. 19)
- B. Significant Stones (vv. 20–23)

Ink and Stone

Fifty Years of Faithfulness

- C. Sovereign Strength (v. 24)

Conclusion

- A. Memory by Monuments
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Aviv A-viv

Asherah Uh-*she*-ruh

Baal Bay-ul

Canaan Kay-nun

Canaanite Kay-nu-**nite**

Gilgal *Gil-gal* (G as in *get*)
Nisan *Nye-san*
tabernacle ***tah***-burr-nah-kul

Introduction

A. Monuments of Memory

Etched into the interior stone walls of the Lincoln Memorial is the following statement, visible to all who visit the ninety-nine-foot-tall structure in Washington, DC: “In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.”

The influence of the sixteenth US president is undeniable. He played a significant role in ending the Civil War, establishing freedom for thousands of enslaved people through the Emancipation Proclamation, and helping to ensure the integrity of the struggling union. Two years after his death, Congress passed the first bills to begin the process of designing a memorial to honor the slain president. Today, this memorial commemorates his service and accomplishments, inviting visitors to reflect on his efforts to create a nation characterized by “liberty and justice for all.”

Memorials and monuments help people remember influential people or significant events. Some memorials serve a distinctly spiritual purpose in reminding people of God’s faithfulness and work. As the ancient Israelites entered the promised land, they commemorated their history and the mighty acts of the Lord for just such a purpose.

B. Lesson Context

Following the death of Moses and his generation, a change in Israelite leadership occurred (see [Numbers 27:12–23](#)). Details of that transition, from Moses to Joshua, are noted in the Lesson Context of [Lesson 1](#).

Important events take place between the text for last week’s lesson ([Joshua 1:1–11](#)) and the text of this week’s study. Before entering the land of Canaan, Joshua sent spies to explore the land in general and the city of Jericho in particular ([2:1](#)). The lives of these spies were saved by Rahab, a Canaanite woman in Jericho ([2:2–22](#); see [Lesson 4](#)). When the spies returned to Joshua, they reported that Israelite victory in the land was certain ([2:24](#)).

Having received the positive news, Joshua led the people from Shittim to the Jordan River, about five miles west, where they camped for three days ([Joshua 3:1–2](#)). We might wonder why there is a need to camp for this time after a (perhaps) three-hour walk. One possible answer to that question considers the sheer number of people involved. An earlier census indicates that there were more than 600,000, counting only men aged twenty and older ([Numbers 26:2, 51](#)). That number could easily have been tripled or more by adding women and children. Time is required to communicate with and coordinate everything for so many people ([Joshua 3:1–6](#)).

What followed was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River. Every miracle was intended to

highlight the presence of the Lord with Joshua and the Israelites ([Joshua 3:7](#)).

Priests carrying the ark went ahead of the people and entered the river. At that moment, the waters upstream stopped flowing, just as Joshua had promised ([Joshua 3:14–16](#)). As long as the priests and the ark remained in the riverbed, the Israelites could cross over on dry ground. Joshua then selected twelve men, one from each tribe, and instructed them to each choose a stone from the middle of the temporarily dry riverbed ([4:1–3](#)). These stones were arranged in such a way as to serve as a sign or memory device to following generations regarding the Lord’s deliverance at that very location ([4:6–7](#)).

As today’s lesson begins, almost all the Israelites have crossed the Jordan River on dry ground. Those who hadn’t completed the crossing—namely, the priests with the ark of the covenant—exit last ([Joshua 4:10–13](#)).

I. God’s Proclamation ([Joshua 4:14](#))

A. Joshua’s Reputation (v. [14a](#))

14a. That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel;

This half-verse fulfills an earlier promise from *the Lord* to “exalt [Joshua] in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with [Joshua] as I was with Moses” ([Joshua 3:7](#)). The Hebrew word translated *exalted* carries the idea of becoming in some way “greater” (examples: [Genesis 12:2](#); [1 Kings 1:37](#)). The Lord’s exaltation of this newly installed leader gives complete confidence to *all Israel*. Although the Israelites belong to distinct tribes, they are united as one nation; they all put their trust in Joshua as their leader.

B. People’s Reaction (v. [14b](#))

14b. and they stood in awe of him all the days of his life, just as they had stood in awe of Moses.

The underlying Hebrew word translated *stood in awe* can mean either feelings of terror (examples: [Joshua 8:1](#); [10:8](#), [25](#)) or reverential respect (example: [Psalm 111:9](#)). *Moses* had led the Israelites through the Red Sea and into the wilderness, and the people showed him reverential respect ([Exodus 14:31](#)). Now, Joshua is something of a “new Moses”—someone in the vein of Moses who would lead the Israelites. At this point, Joshua has only led the people across the Jordan River and barely into the promised land (see [Lesson Context](#)). But having just experienced a miracle, they obey and respect him as they did Moses (compare [Joshua 1:16–18](#)). Their future as a nation depends on their obedience to Joshua, the Lord’s appointed leader.

Not all leaders of ancient Israel received the same level of respect and support from the people. God chose other leaders, only for those leaders to falter. The examples of Saul, David, and Solomon come to mind ([1 Samuel 15:23–24](#); [2 Samuel 12:7–9](#); [1 Kings 11:9–10](#)). Although Joshua would later act imperfectly ([Joshua 7:2–5](#); [9:14–15](#)), he served God and Moses faithfully throughout his life.

The record of that service describes him as having served Moses “since youth” (Numbers 11:28). Moses had trusted him implicitly with important tasks (Exodus 17:8–14; 24:13; 33:11; Numbers 13:16). Moses gently rebuked Joshua on one occasion (11:28–30), but such is the relationship between mentor and protégé. By the time of the death of Moses, Joshua has had years of experience and servant leadership with the people.

II. God’s Provision (Joshua 4:15–18)

A. Commanding the Priests (vv. 15–17)

15. Then the LORD said to Joshua,

As the era of Joshua’s leadership continues, *the Lord* is again communicating his will for the new leader of the Israelites. Indeed, the Lord continues to do so throughout the book (compare Joshua 1:1–9; 3:7–8; 4:1–3; 5:2, 9; 6:2). *Joshua* cannot claim ignorance regarding his knowledge of the Lord’s commands.

16–17. “Command the priests carrying the ark of the covenant law to come up out of the Jordan.” So Joshua commanded the priests, “Come up out of the Jordan.”

The *ark* is a rectangular wooden box, overlaid with gold, that contains the stone tablets of the law that were given to Moses (see Exodus 25:10–22; 37:1–9). It serves as the focal point of tabernacle worship because it is the location for God’s presence and revelation for the Israelites. As they travel through the wilderness toward the promised land, the ark leads them (Numbers 10:33–36; Joshua 3:3, 6, 15–16). Priests from the tribe of Levi are responsible for carrying the ark through the wilderness and for taking care of the various vessels of the tabernacle (Deuteronomy 10:8; 31:9; Numbers 3:30–32; Joshua 3:3).

The ark is referred to by several names in Scripture, including “the ark of God” (1 Samuel 3:3) and “the ark of the covenant” (Joshua 3:3; etc.). The designation, the *ark of the covenant law*, emphasizes the testimony of God’s covenant promises to his people. The covenant law can refer to the actual stone tablets inscribed by God, given to Moses, and housed in the ark. The ark and its contents symbolize the relationship between God and the Israelites, reminding the people of his presence. As Joshua and the Israelites cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Canaan, it is crucial that they remember God’s promises and prioritize their obedience to his word.

B. Carrying the Ark (v. 18)

18. 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 their place and ran at flood stage as before.

The priests in charge of carrying the *ark of the covenant* are both the first ones to set foot on the Jordan River’s dry riverbed and the last to finish the crossing (Joshua 3:14, 17). The detail that *the waters of Jordan ... ran at flood stage as before* indicates that the water level of the river was at its high

point in the spring (see next verse). These details and others suggest that the absence of a water obstacle is not simply a natural occurrence such as a drought; God's power created the pathway.

Several decades earlier, the Lord had made a way for the Hebrews to escape slavery by parting the Red Sea ([Exodus 14:21–22](#)). That miraculous event instilled fear in the inhabitants of Canaan ([Joshua 2:9–10](#)). Now the Lord has miraculously made a way for the people to pass through another body of water unharmed; this results in additional fear on the part of the land's inhabitants ([5:1](#)).

What Do You Think?

How has God worked miraculously throughout your life to lead you to the next part of his plan?

Digging Deeper

How do you remain attentive to God's leading, even in situations that seem impossible?

III. God's Promises

([Joshua 4:19–24](#))

A. Sacred Ground (v. 19)

19. On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho.

Our conclusion in the previous verse that the crossing occurred in the springtime is confirmed. The further specification that it is *the tenth day* of that month recalls that the Lord had instructed the enslaved Israelites to prepare for Passover observance on that day ([Exodus 12:3](#)).

The name of *the first month* under consideration is given as “Aviv” in [Exodus 13:4](#); [23:15](#); [34:18](#); and [Deuteronomy 16:1](#). This month corresponds with late March and early April. Considering [1 Chronicles 12:15](#) allows us to see the connection between the exact month and day of the year, the river's water level ([Joshua 4:18](#), above), and the fact that this is the time of a harvest ([3:14–15](#)). The name of this month became “Nisan” during the Babylonian exile centuries later ([Esther 3:7](#)). The month of Aviv/Nisan marks the beginning of the “religious year” for the Israelites.

There is more than one town named *Gilgal* in the Old Testament. One such town is about twenty miles northwest of Jericho. That is the Gilgal of [1 Samuel 7:16](#) and [2 Kings 2:1](#), so it is not the one mentioned here. The name *Gilgal* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “circle” or “rolling.” The Lord designates this site on *the eastern border of Jericho* with this name because “today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” ([Joshua 5:9](#)).

B. Significant Stones (vv. 20–23)

20. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.

Joshua had commanded twelve Israelites to collect *twelve stones*, one for each tribe, from the *Jordan* riverbed as they passed through it ([Joshua 4:1–8](#); see [Lesson Context](#)). Previously, Joshua had arranged the stones in the riverbed where the priests were standing ([4:9](#)). Now, having crossed to the

other side of the river, *Joshua* erects the stones as a monument to commemorate God's provision to cross the river. The Law of Moses prohibits the use of cut stones for constructing altars ([Exodus 20:25](#); compare [Joshua 8:30–31](#)). However, this directive is not a total prohibition on constructing monuments. The exact arrangement of the stones is unknown. But it is built in such a way that it would be visible to others so that they could also remember the Lord's mighty act of deliverance (next verse).

21–22. He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’”

The content of these verses repeats Joshua's earlier words in [Joshua 4:6–7](#), though the phrasing is slightly different here. *These stones* stand as a memorial for the benefit of future generations, symbolizing God's provision that enabled the people of *Israel* to cross the *Jordan River on dry ground*. Additionally, this memorial would remind future generations that it was the one true God of Israel, not the fictitious pagan gods Baal or Asherah, who brought the people into the promised land.

What Do You Think?

How do you intentionally share with younger generations about your faith in God and his transforming mercy?

Digging Deeper

What is one action you can take in the upcoming week to build a spiritual legacy within your family?

Ink and Stone

Early in our marriage, my husband noticed several stacks of loose letters, cards, and drawings scattered around my office. He asked, “Why are you keeping all this stuff? If it really means something to you, we can just scan them and throw the originals away.” He sees pieces of paper as a bother, and he'll always prefer digital versions to physical copies.

I, on the other hand, love physical paper copies. I love seeing the ink blotches on a handwritten letter. I cherish seeing and touching notes, photos, and gifts from the past. Holding a handwritten note from a dear friend, written twenty years ago, helps me remember the feel of her hug, hear her laughter, and delight in the blessing of her presence. Physical items have the power to evoke significant memories.

The stone monument on the banks of the Jordan River was one such physical reminder for the Israelites. The people could see the stones and be reminded of God's faithfulness, guidance, and direction.

Tell the stories of God's faithfulness.



Visual for [Lesson 2](#). Display this visual as you ask participants to share with a partner a story of how they have experienced God's faithfulness.

Ink and stone—both serve as physical reminders of the past. What is a physical reminder of God's past faithfulness and blessing toward you?

—KS

23. “For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over.

This verse highlights some important points regarding the crossing of the *Jordan*. First, it emphasizes that it is made possible by the power of *the Lord*, not simply the result of a natural phenomenon. The Law of Moses sharply contrasts allegiance to *your God* with allegiance to “their gods” (examples: [Deuteronomy 7:16, 25; 12:31; 20:18](#)). It is the one true God who created a path through the river for the people to cross, not the fictitious gods of the peoples the Israelites came to conquer. The absolute power of the one true God has been—and will be—demonstrated time and again (example: [1 Kings 18:16–38](#)). During the creation of the world, God separated the waters from dry land ([Genesis 1:9](#)). He has total control over the waters, the winds, and all parts of creation (compare [Matthew 8:23–27](#)). No

body of water can oppose him!

Second, this verse notes the parallel between the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan River and their ancestors' crossing of the *Red Sea* some forty years earlier. The Lord has given this new generation of Israelites a way through the waters, as he did for the previous generation. This new generation is experiencing a "new Exodus" also marked by the crossing of waters—theirs is an exodus out of wilderness wanderings into the promised "land flowing with milk and honey" ([Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are the points of similarity and dissimilarity between the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan River and their crossing of the Red Sea?

Digging Deeper

What do these events teach us about God and his relationship with his people?

Fifty Years of Faithfulness

My dad has faithfully served as a minister of God's Word for over fifty years. Throughout his lengthy ministry, he has witnessed numerous examples of God's faithfulness. For instance, there was a time when our family needed a second vehicle, but we did not have the money to buy one. God, in his faithfulness, moved the heart of another believer to donate a car. While the vehicle was far from luxurious—it was at least twenty years old and barely running—it served as a tangible example of God's provision. It met our needs and allowed us to help others. My dad can still recall multiple examples like this one when the Lord's faithfulness was evident.

How often do you take time to reflect on God's faithfulness? To fail to do so is to face the consequences of forgetting God (see [Psalm 78](#)). As the Israelites entered the promised land, they remembered God's faithfulness to them—from the deliverance out of Egyptian bondage, to the crossing of the Red Sea, to their passage through the Jordan River.

What needs to happen for you to shift your focus from the troubles of the moment to the power and faithfulness of God?

—KS

C. Sovereign Strength (v. 24)

24. "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."

This verse reveals God's plans and purposes for the memorial of stones. One purpose is to communicate to *all the people of the earth* about what the Lord has done for the Israelites. *The hand of the Lord* brought the Israelites out of enslavement and guided them to the land ([Exodus 13:3, 9, 14; Deuteronomy 6:21; 7:8; 9:26](#); see [Jeremiah 32:21](#)).

The phrase *the hand of the Lord* is anthropomorphic, which means attributing human characteristics. Scripture often refers to the Lord in terms of human features (examples: [Deuteronomy 8:3](#);

[Judges 2:11](#); [Psalm 18:15](#); [Isaiah 53:1](#)). These are to be taken figuratively since God does not have a physical body ([John 4:24](#)).

Second, the memorial is to be a tangible reminder for the Israelites to live in honor and obedience to the Lord. To *fear the Lord* means to live in reverence of the Lord and his will. This fear is not a sense of dread or terror; rather, it is respect and reverence based on the Lord's identity and faithfulness. Reverent fear forms the foundation for obedience to the Lord. This kind of fear is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom ([Proverbs 1:7](#); [9:10](#)). On the other hand, to have no fear of God is to invite dire consequences ([Psalms 36:1–4](#); [55:19](#)).

Therefore, as the Israelites enter the land, they construct a memorial recognizing the Lord's sovereign strength—his mighty hand that had brought them thus far. Everyone in the land, whether Israelite or not, will come to know his strength firsthand.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to cultivate greater reverence or “fear” of the Lord?

Digging Deeper

How is fear of the Lord related to obedience to the Lord?

Conclusion

A. Memory by Monuments

We create monuments of various sorts to commemorate significant leaders, historical events, and consequential actions. But how often do we build memorials to celebrate God's work?

Scripture provides several examples of God's people constructing memorials to remember and celebrate God's work. These memorials come in different forms, including physical structures (example: [Genesis 28:18–22](#)), sacred ceremonies (example: [Exodus 12:14](#)), and specific days of observance (example: [20:8–11](#)). Despite such differences, these memorials serve a common purpose: to remember and celebrate God's faithfulness.

One of Joshua's first actions as leader was to institute the memorial at Gilgal. Before the people went further into the land, they collectively paused to ensure remembrance of the Lord's providing a way to cross the Jordan River.

Think about that sequence: (1) God provides, then (2) the people ensure remembrance, then (3) the people move on. Do we follow that same pattern, or do we skip step 2?

If we pay attention to God's work, we will find moments where he has provided for us. When we notice God's work, we can build our own memorials to God's work. Although we may not construct a stone monument, other ways exist to remember and celebrate God's work and faithfulness.

What Do You Think?

What memorial can you create to remember and celebrate God's work?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do the practice of baptism and the observance of the Lord's Supper serve as such memorials?

B. Prayer

Lord God, you have done mighty works for your people, culminating in your saving acts through Jesus Christ. Strengthen our resolve to remember these acts so that we can fully understand and celebrate your steadfast faithfulness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Create reminders of God's steadfast faithfulness!

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Before class begins, write the following statements on the board for everyone to see:

1. *I know that others are a faithful source of support because ...*
2. *An example from history of a faithful person is ...*
3. *Unfaithful people hurt others by ...*

Divide the class into three small groups and assign one statement to each group. Invite willing participants in each group to complete the assigned statement and share their responses with the group.

After five minutes, reconvene the class and ask volunteers to share their responses. Then lead a brainstorming session to create a definition of the word *faithful*. Write the definition on the board.

Lead into Bible study by saying, "God has been faithful to his people throughout history. In today's study, we'll see how the ancient Israelites responded to God's faithfulness."

Into the Word

Divide the class into two groups: **Red Sea Group** ([Exodus 13:17–14:31](#)) and **Jordan River Group** ([Joshua 3–4](#)). Direct each group to silently read the Scripture texts associated with their designated group. Distribute a pen and a handout (you create) with the following questions to each group:

1. *Who led the crossing of the body of water?*
2. *Why did the Israelites need to cross that body of water?*
3. *In what ways did the Lord intervene in the crossing?*
4. *How did the Israelites demonstrate faith despite risk and danger?*
5. *What encouragement did the Israelite leader give before the crossing?*
6. *How did the Israelites commemorate or celebrate the successful crossing?*
7. *In what ways did God show faithfulness to his people?*

Ask a volunteer from each group to write their group's responses on the handout. After calling time, ask volunteers from each group to present their findings before the class.

Then, ask the following questions for whole-class discussion: 1—How is God's provision through the waters a display of his faithfulness? 2—What was the significance of the memorial at Gilgal? 3—What kinds of memorials throughout history have people created to remind them of God's faithfulness?

Option: Distribute copies of the "Responding to Faithfulness" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Direct learners to work in pairs to complete it as indicated. If time allows, ask volunteers to share their responses before the whole class.

Into Life

Lead into the final section of the lesson by saying, "We've studied how the Israelites created a stone memorial to celebrate God's faithfulness. Even though we may not have access to stones, we can still create our own 'monument of memory' to celebrate God's work in our lives."

Based on the interests of your class members, choose one or more of the following activities to help them remember and celebrate God's faithfulness.

Illustrating Faithfulness. Distribute poster board and markers to the class. Invite participants to create an image depicting how they have each experienced God's acts of faithfulness.

Stories of God's Work. Distribute an index card and pen to each participant. Direct them to write a brief report detailing a time when they experienced God's work of faithfulness. Then ask volunteers to read their examples for the class.

Great Is Thy Faithfulness. Distribute copies of the "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" activity from the activity page. Have learners work with a partner to complete as indicated before discussing conclusions as a whole class.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(September 13—Israel Remembers God's Deeds\)](#)
