

WHAT MEAN THESE STONES

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Text, Joshua 4:1-10, 19-24

We come in this text to one of the climactic events in all of biblical history. The children of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years as an entire generation has died. They have been wandering as children of a promise deferred, because of the unbelief of their elders.

But now they are at the very bank of the Jordan River—that great defining boundary which separates their past from their future, God's promise and its fulfillment, their hopes and their possession of the land of promise. Behind them was slavery in Egypt and bare survival in the wilderness. In front, by God's steadfast promise, was a land richer than their dreams, more fruitful than their hopes, and more beautiful than their imagination. And yet, the river Jordan presented a challenge as well as a promise. God will make clear at this river that just as the children of Israel had not brought themselves out of Pharaoh's Egypt or safely through the wilderness wanderings, they will not get themselves across this river.

Like many of you, I have stood on the banks of the Jordan River. I well remember when I first caught a glimpse of the Jordan. It seemed so small—so nonthreatening. It was narrow, and shallow, and it seemed to me that even a Methodist could cross this river and not be immersed. At least that is the way it looked where I first saw, and when I first saw this remarkable river.

But the Jordan has another character, and is all together a different river when the winter snows melt on Mt. Hermon and millions of gallons of water cascade down the Jordan Valley and into the river. At that time the river spans 90 to 100 feet across, its waters swift and menacing and up to twelve feet deep. As one observer noted: "The swiftness is rendered more dangerous by the muddy bed and curious zig-zag current which will easily sweep a man from the side into the centre of the stream."

And it was to this raging and impassible river that the children of Israel came, and here the Lord God performed a miracle which paralleled the miracle of the exodus. Even as He rolled back the waters of the Red Sea, here He rolled back the waters of the Jordan. Just as He had promised, when the feet of the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant touched the water, the waters were rolled back, and the children of promise crossed and stood for the first time in the land of promise.

And then the Lord through Joshua commanded the people to commemorate the great event. One man from each tribe was to go back to the river and select a stone—a commemorative stone—and place it as a memorial. This they evidently established twice; once in the river where the priests stood, and also at Gilgal.

The Lord created us as rational beings, *homo sapiens*, but He also gifted us with the power of memory. This is a remarkably powerful capacity which is apparently shared by no other creature. We are shaped by our memories, trained by our memories, sometimes liberated and sometimes trapped by our memories.

I heard an author interviewed just recently, who said that she was driven by an "Irish memory." As she explained, "I remember every bad thing that ever happened to me." That is a tendency which knows no

ethnic boundaries. Tragically, we seem to remember what we should forget, and forget what we should remember. In any event, we know that something unspeakably precious is lost when memory fades.

But even as God has gifted us with the power to remember, in our frailty and fallenness we are also prone to forget. How could it be that the Israelites would ever forget this great day when the river of promise was crossed? The Lord knew that the tendency to forget is sometimes more powerful than the power to remember, and thus the stones.

The stones were to be a sign, an unmistakable signification that God had acted here, making the provision, halting the river, revealing the dry ground, making clear the pathway to the Promised Land. The stones came with instructions: "When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying What mean these stones? Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over the Jordan on dry land. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan from before you until we passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up from before us, until we were gone over: That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the Lord your God forever" [Joshua 4: 21b-24].

We can picture the scene the morning after the crossing. Did the people awaken and run out to see the stones, just to make certain that they were really in the land of promise? But, the purpose was for later generations—that they might see, ask, and be told the story of God's faithfulness to His people, of God's sovereign providence; of His gracious, perfect, and immutable will.

And so we find ourselves gathered here today, marking the sesquicentennial of the Southern Baptist Convention . . . looking at stones. What do these stones mean? What is the significance of all this?

As we reflect together, I would like to suggest five imperatives I believe are essential:

First, We Must Renew our Passion for God.

Seeing the stones and hearing the story, the children of Israel would know clearly that they had not crossed the Jordan on their own. They would have been swept away by the raging current and forever lost, the promise unfulfilled. The stones cried out, "God did this! By His hand we were delivered; by His power and faithfulness we crossed on dry ground." And so it is with us, as we mark 150 years of the Southern Baptist Convention. God did this. He worked through His human creatures, men and women who were the instruments of His glory and purpose, but God did this.

The fact that the Southern Baptist Convention exists 150 years after its founding, much less the fact that it has been so remarkably blessed, is a testimony to God's faithfulness and His goodness to us. Our first task is to acknowledge that just as the Israelites knew that a miracle had made their way safe, so no less a miracle has brought us to this place.

And yet, we must move beyond mere acknowledgment and thankfulness, and pray for a renewed passion for God in our midst—a passion which frames the very core of our being—the passion to know God in His sovereign power and might, to serve God in the accomplishment of His will, to worship the Father in His beauty and holiness. We must

pray to know God's truth, mercy, greatness, omnipotence, omniscience, and lovingkindness; but we must also know that His holiness issues in a holy wrath, a settled and eternal opposition to sin which eventuates in judgment.

We are not much marked by passion. In the midst of our building and leading, our coming and going, and the frantic pace of our over-scheduled lives, we have seen our passion dissipate in our busyness. This happens to denominations as well. Passion can be lost in programs and progress reports and calendars. In doing what is good we may fail to do that which is best, to develop our passion to know God, by His grace to grow more like Him.

We serve a mighty Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and just as Israel was a people set apart to the glory of God, so consummately is the Church for which Christ died. Our passion should be like that of the psalmist: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for you, O God" [Psalm 42:1].

What would God do with a denomination of churches driven and possessed by a holy passion for Him? In the midst of this secular age and its debased passions, let us here by God's grace set ourselves to this holy passion.

Second, We must Reclaim our Theological Heritage

To be possessed by a passion for God is also to be filled with a holy commitment to stand fast, earnestly to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Our Lord has made clear His own jealous and zealous insistence that those who are known by His name be known by His truth.

Thus Southern Baptists at their best and most faithful have always stood upon the great biblical theological heritage upon which this denomination was established. And yet we live in an age which denigrates, rejects, and compromises God's revealed truth. Doctrinal standards and theological convictions are treated with contempt or so modified that the Gospel is itself lost.

We see even in our own midst the development of denominational amnesia which will quickly issue into theological compromise and doctrinal declension. We live in a post-modern, post-Christian era which in its self-proclaimed sophistication has turned its back on God and His truth. Compromise has infected most major denominations and scores of churches, where the message preached bears little or no resemblance to the New Testament.

A virtual war against God's truth is now taking place, in some quarters through the outright rejection of Christianity's central doctrines, and in other quarters through the subtle but devastating compromise and transformation of historic Christianity into something altogether different. As Paul warned us, we are to preach "no other Gospel" but the gospel of salvation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son.

When we look and ask, "What mean these stones?," we must remember that Southern Baptists are a people of deep evangelical conviction. And yet, we are in danger of becoming a cut-flower denomination. Elton Trueblood once described America as a cut-flower civilization; beautiful to the eye, but dying for lack of connection to its roots. So it may be with a denomination which cuts itself off, consciously or unconsciously, from its theological heritage.

And our theological heritage is rich indeed. We stand with those earliest Baptists who rediscovered the regenerate church, believer's baptism by immersion, and the necessity of individual confession of Jesus Christ. We stand with Baptists throughout the centuries who have held to our doctrinal distinctives and to the great central truths of Christianity.

We take our stand with the founders of this Convention, who preached the Gospel without fear and without compromise. We stand with Basil Manly Sr. and James P. Boyce on the unconditional holiness, majesty, and greatness of God; with J. M. Frost and Basil Manly Jr. on the authority, inerrancy, and inspiration of the Bible; with B. H.

Carroll and J. B. Gambrell on the extravagant sovereignty of God's grace; with E. Y. Mullins and W. T. Conner on the centrality of Jesus Christ; and with all those who have held fast to the faith.

When a denomination begins to consider doctrine divisive, theology troublesome, and conviction inconvenient, consider that denomination on its way to a well-deserved death. We take our stand upon the great essential truths of biblical faith, even when the world is at war with those truths.

We cannot ignore that war. The Jesus Seminar denies the truthfulness of God's Word and the reality of the incarnation, leaving Jesus as a quaint and acerbic Palestinian teacher. A major conference for women sponsored by mainline Protestant denominations celebrates pagan worship and denies the cross and atonement. The Protestant mainstream, as it describes itself, allows the wholesale doctrinal evacuation of the faith, all packaged as a process of modernization and restatement.

Closer to home we hear calls to market the Gospel, as if it is a commodity to be sold. But we have no product, and no packaging. Our only message is the cross of Jesus Christ—a message that will save, but never sell.

I bring you a report from the front lines as I speak to you today. These are not easy days, and this is no season for the faint of heart. Our battles are not over, nor will they ever be. This denomination has experienced years of difficult struggle and painful conflict as we are determined to see the truth of God's Holy Word taught, defended, and proclaimed. But the tendency of denominations, and institutions, and anything human hands touch and human beings lead is to drift away from allegiance to the truth. A humble determination to see that this drift does not happen is required at all times, lest we find ourselves as Charles Spurgeon warned, on a perpetual down-grade. As Spurgeon warned:

The house is being robbed, its very walls are being digged down, but the good people who are in bed are too fond of the warmth and too much afraid of getting broken heads, to go downstairs and meet the burglars . . . Inspiration and speculation cannot long abide in peace. Compromise there can be none. We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word and yet reject it; we cannot believe in the atonement and deny it; we cannot hold the doctrine of the fall and yet talk of the evolution of spiritual life from human nature; we cannot recognize the punishment of the impenitent and yet indulge the 'larger hope.' One way or the other we must go. Decision is the virtue of the hour.¹

Spurgeon wrote those words over 100 years ago. The British Baptists of his day did not heed his warning, and the downgrade gained momentum. We dare not ignore his words today, for all around us we can see the ruins of once great churches and denominations which in the name of tolerance and inclusivity forfeited their integrity.

We should heed the words spoken almost a century ago by J. M. Frost, president of the Sunday School Board:

More and more we must come the feel as the deepest and mightiest power of our convictions that a 'thus saith the Lord' is the end of all controversy. With this definitely settled and fixed, all else comes into line as regards belief and practice. . . . The noblest and mightiest union is the union formed in conviction—none other is worth the naming.²

We must pray for a genuine theological reformation among us—for a recovery of conviction and confession.

Third, We must Recover our Zeal for the Gospel

There was a missionary purpose behind those stones set at Gilgal. As Joshua stated, the stones would cry out so that "all the people of the

earth may know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty." The children of promise were themselves the signs of God's power and purpose. The stones stood to bear mute testimony.

Francis Schaeffer told of a message inscribed on stones in a Swiss lake bed, "When you read this, weep." If the message was visible, a devastating drought was at hand. In a similar fashion, those stones at Gilgal cried out of the faithfulness, power, and glory of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was a message for all the peoples of the earth.

When those founders gathered together in Augusta to establish the Southern Baptist Convention, they were clear about their purpose; to combine the energies and commitment of their churches for "one sacred effort, for the propagation of the Gospel." In addressing the public to explain their actions, they spoke these words: "Our objects then are the extension of the Messiah's kingdom, and the glory of our Lord."

What do these stones mean? They mean that this is a convention of churches established for the urgent purpose of reaching the lost with the only Gospel that saves. We often repeat to ourselves that missions and evangelism are the focus of our energies, but I wonder if those who founded this convention would recognize in us this same urgent purpose.

We can point to the history's largest foreign missionary force and thousands of churches planted at home and abroad. We can stand upon our statistics and demonstrate the growth of the convention into the nation's largest non-Catholic denomination. But we must also face the fact of a decline in our baptismal ratio to membership, the fact that a majority of our churches are plateaued or declining, the fact that we are not keeping pace with the explosion of the world's population, the truth that we are losing the battle for America's great cities.

Our Lord looked at Jerusalem and wept. Do we weep for Atlanta, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago; for London, Calcutta, Bucharest, Beijing, and Tokyo? Does our heart beat with the fervent prayer for the salvation of sinners?

This has been a hallmark of our heritage, but it must also be the heartbeat of our present and future. Nothing less will do for the blood-bought Church of the redeemed, for we have all been saved by the matchless grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ever before us must be the great theme of salvation and the redemptive purpose of God. For the holy, omnipotent, righteous God who cannot tolerate sin but must punish sin eternally is He who sent his Son, the incarnate Christ, born of a virgin; who lived a sinless life, performed miracles, and accomplished the Father's redemptive purpose through his death as our substitute on Calvary's cross, and was raised on the third day. He paid the penalty for our sin, the righteous dying for the unrighteous, the Lamb of God laying down his life for sinners, that we might have life, and life everlasting. We are thus justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This glorious truth means that when the Father looks to the redeemed through the lens of the cross, He sees not our own unrighteousness and filthy rags, but the glorious righteousness of his dear Son, imputed to us by God's atoning act.

The most wonderful and momentous truth in all the world is "Jesus Saves." The Lord God of all creation, holy and without sin, takes great delight in the salvation of sinners—and so must we. But we must stand firm in preaching that there is only one name under heaven and earth whereby we must be saved, and that is the name of Jesus Christ. It was this same Christ who said of himself, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father, but by Me." And yet, the exclusivity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is among the most compromised truths in the contemporary church. Those who preach such a gospel are charged as being intolerant, insensitive, and imperialistic in a world of religious pluralism. But if Jesus is truly the Savior, he is the solitary Savior. He himself has left us no other option of belief.

We have so many churches, and our responsibility is so great. As George W. Truett stated, our churches must be "great life-saving sta-

tions to point lost sinners to Christ." As he continued,

*"The supreme indictment that you can bring against a church . . . is that such a church lacks in passion and compassion for human souls. A church is nothing better than an ethical club if its sympathies for lost souls do not overflow, and if it does not go out to seek to point lost souls to the knowledge of Jesus Christ."*³

We must work to see our churches as evangelistic congregations working together in a concert of Gospel penetration which overflows across this continent and the globe. We must see our seminaries known throughout the world for the preparation of Great Commission ministers and missionaries.

I believe we must hear our forefathers and foremothers asking, "How is it that we did so much with so little, and you do so little with so much?" Have we grown distant from the Gospel—from our own salvation? A greater opportunity lies before us than has faced any generation of Christians since the Lord established His church. We dare not sound retreat.

Fourth, We Must Recognize our Times and Our Task

To those with historical perspective, a great gulf seems to separate 1845 from 1995. Those who founded this denomination lived in a world so different from our own, that we cannot calculate the scale.

I am not speaking of the technological developments which have seen the world changed before our eyes; the revolutionary transformations in communications, transportation, and information technologies. Instead, I refer to the incredible change in worldview which separates the world of the mid-nineteenth century from our own.

We live in a thoroughly secularized culture which is crumbling at the foundations. The great fixed truths of the Christian worldview have been displaced and rejected by an age of rampant relativism, subjectivism, secularism, and even paganism.

We are living on the brink of what may be a new dark age. The light of God's revelation is hated and we live amidst a rebellion like that of Korah in the Old Testament. Every one does what is right in his own sight.

As G. K. Chesterton warned many years ago, Rome fell when the barbarians assaulted her gates. Our civilization is even more imperiled because the barbarians are within our own gates. A disguised lawlessness spreads throughout our nation and Western culture. A death culture comes as humans, having thrown overboard the restraint of God's law, take into their own hands the powers of life and death. The death symbolism in our popular culture, rap music, motion pictures, and television, intertwined with a perversion of sexuality, is the narcotic backdrop to our downward spiral.

We live in the most deadly century of human history. Dozens of millions of victims have fallen at the hands of murderous dictators, other millions have fallen in two world wars and bloody regional conflicts or civil wars. The ovens of Dachau and the killing fields of Cambodia are central symbols of our age.

But the culture of death is ever more pervasive in smaller scale. We have grown accustomed to death and violence in the streets, in the schools, in the cities, in the home, and in the womb. A society which would abort tens of millions of unborn infants while celebrating its growing prosperity is a culture set for divine judgment. The murder of the very young and the very old, and those judged as the Nazis declared, "life unworthy of life;" the assisted suicide of the terminally ill and the merely depressed—all these are matter of open debate. Darkness falls.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, one of the true prophets of a decadent age, spoke the truth. Explaining the murderous age, he stated this: "Man has forgotten God: that is why all this has happened."

All around us we see a growing paganism. Humanism has turned into paganism and the worship of a countless number of idolatrous

deities—gods of sex and pleasure, of leisure and amusement, of violence and power, and of personal fulfillment and self-esteem.

Change and decay all around we see, and it comes as the moral and spiritual degeneration of the nation. We are quickly on a slide to see homosexuality fully celebrated and homosexual partnerships recognized by government as equal to heterosexual marriage.

As Joshua and the children of Israel crossed the Jordan, they knew they were entering enemy territory. Encamped about them were hostile peoples devoted to pagan deities, and so it is with us. But Southern Baptists have lived for generations in a cultural comfort zone which has hidden this truth from many eyes. Those eyes, I believe, will not be closed to this truth for long. The children of Israel were to be witnesses to the peoples of the earth, but the church is also described as salt and light. We now find ourselves living in an age which desires neither salt nor light, but is hanging by a thread in the desperate need of confrontation with biblical truth.

Before crossing the Jordan, Joshua gathered the people and said to them, "Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" [Joshua 3:5]. As we have come together for this convention, let us also seek by God's grace to sanctify ourselves; to remove any stain from our moral witness, to leave no charge against our own testimony.

Fifth, We Must Refocus on our Mission and Mandate

What mean these stones? The stones of our heritage remind us that we are a people in movement, just as were the children of Israel. Our mission and mandate remain constant, but our programs and structures, our organizational charts and implementation strategies, must always be open to change.

Albert Einstein once lamented that the twentieth century had greatly confused the means with the end. That is certainly a peril for the people of God. We can grow so comfortable with existing patterns and programs that we lose sight of the mission.

The Southern Baptist Convention is a means, and not an end in itself. It is the Church for whom Christ died, and to whom He gave the keys of the Kingdom. The fulfillment of the mission of the churches is our end, the Southern Baptist Convention is but a means toward that end. The Convention has been a means God has richly blessed. We celebrate and give thanks to God for what He has accomplished through this convention of Great Commission churches.

We also look to the future with the determination to see this convention and its agencies rightly focused upon the mission of the churches. That is why the mission statement central to the "Covenant for a New Century" is so important:

The Southern Baptist Convention exists to facilitate, extend, and enlarge the Great Commission ministries of Southern Baptist churches, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, upon the authority of Holy Scripture, and by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

That sets the right order. The Southern Baptist Convention has no mission but the Great Commission ministries of Southern Baptist churches. The great end and purpose is that set by our founders, "the extension of the Messiah's kingdom, and the glory of our God."

If we keep this right, we will never go wrong. If we get this wrong, we can never be right. Our Lord has brought us to the brink of the twenty-first century, and this must be our sacred purpose, until He returns.

Conclusion

What mean these stones? No individual can fully answer that question for this Convention of churches, but together we confess that these stones point to the glory of God and the fulfillment of his eternal

purpose. When our children come to us and ask, "What do these stones mean?", how will we answer them?

We are reminded of the New Testament truth that we ourselves are stones, living stones, "built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ" [I Peter 2:5]. We remember that we are "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who were once not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but have now obtained mercy" [I Peter 2:9-10].

We are ourselves a convention of churches, made up of congregations of living stones, living and serving and witnessing to the glory of God.

On this sesquicentennial convention, aware of the significance of such a commemoration, I am drawn to the words of Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Can you see that great cloud of witnesses with me? Among them are saints once among us. In our imagination I believe we should hear them asking us what is most on their hearts, even as they encourage us in the race. Can you hear the voices?

- William B. Johnson asking, "Are you keeping the Convention true?"
- Basil Manly Sr. asking, "Are you trusting in the providence of God?"
- James P. Boyce asking, "Are you holding fast to the doctrine?"
- James Frost asking, "Are you maintaining the authority and inerrancy of Holy Scripture?"
- J. B. Gambrell asking, "Are you still reaching the common people?"
- Lottie Moon asking, "Are you ready to sacrifice?"
- Annie Armstrong asking, "Are you ready to serve?"
- B. H. Carroll asking, "Have you defended the faith?"
- L. R. Scarborough asking, "Are you with Christ, after the lost?"
- E. Y. Mullins asking, "Did you stand on Baptist principles?"
- Bill Wallace asking, "Are you willing to die?"
- Baker James Cauthen asking, "Are you willing to go?"
- R. G. Lee asking, "Are you preaching the Word?"

I can hear questions from the Apostles and the Prophets. And I know that we will one day see our Lord, when we meet Him face to face, and we will answer to the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

But for now we find ourselves gathered together, looking at stones and hearing the question, "What mean these stones?" What do the last 150 years of the Southern Baptist Convention mean? And so we answer, "That all the people of the earth might know that hand of the Lord, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the Lord your God always." Amen.

1Charles H. Spurgeon, in *Sword and Trowel*, 1888, 249.

2J. M. Frost, "Introduction," in *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1900), p. 12.

3George W. Truett, *A Quest for Souls* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917), p. 67.