

This Stone will be a Witness

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I could hear you thinking, as you read the title for tonight's message.

Stones? Stones a Witness? Exactly. I am not sure that stone make much of an impact in our modern daily life, but **over the centuries**, stones or rocks were quite important.

As I reflected on stones being integral to culture, I realized that stones are the basis for many **Idioms**:

- Stone walls do not a prison make
- A rolling stone gathers no moss
- Kill two birds with one stone
- Set or cast in stone
- Its like getting blood out of a stone
- A heart of stone
- Leave no stone unturned
- Sink like a stone
- A stone's throw
- Stone dead
- Turned to stone
- Constant dripping wears away the stone

And of course, tombstones are the ultimate statement on life and death. When I traveled to England, the tombstones that lined the churchyards fascinated me. Many were no longer with graves, they were merely lined up against the rock walls in solemn testimony of lives that had been lived.

Here in America, we often hear of less sacred tributes on tombstones:

- From Tombstone Arizona "Here lies Lester Moore; Four slugs from a .44, no Les, no more."

- From Lincoln, Maine "Sacred to the memory of Jared Bates who died August the 6th 1800. His widow, aged 24, lives at 7 Elm Street, has every qualification for a good wife, and yearns to be comforted."
- From Springdale, Ohio "Here lies Jane Smith, wife of Thomas Smith, marble cutter. This monument was erected by her husband as a tribute to her memory and a specimen of his work. Monuments of the same style 350 dollars."

Moving on from this, I did a bit of DEEPLY SERIOUS biblical research on stones and found the following uses for stones:

- A stone was a writing tablet Ex 34:1
- A stone was a punishment Acts 7:58
- A stone was a temptation Luke 4:3
- A stone was a pillow Gen 28:18
- A stone was a door Matt 27:60
- A stone was a container John 2:6
- A stone was an idol Lev 26:1
- A stone was a chair Ex 17:12
- A stone was God's house Gen 28:22
- A stone was a lethal weapon 1 Sam 17:49
- A stone was a boundary marker Deut 19:14
- A stone was a meeting place 1 Sa 20:19
- A stone was the foundation 1 Kings 5:17
- Stones were ruins 2 Kings 19:25
- Stones were decorations Rev 21:19
- A stone is a test of faith 1 Peter 2:8

TRANSITION

Obviously, stones have played a more important part in the history of humankind than we, on a daily basis, give them credit. Two uses for stones not yet mentioned were the stone as a memorial and a witness.

The Stone as a Memorial and Witness

If you would like, you can turn with me to Joshua 4:1-9 NIV

.. **And they are there to this day.**

There are 3 important aspects of this passage:

- The placing of the memorial occurred after the children of Israel had been obedient in crossing the Jordan. **Their faith had been tested, they had passed the test.**
- **Everyone was represented in the memorial (12 tribes) We never pass a test of faith alone!**
- The memorial was for commemorating the event, but more importantly, it was a **teaching method.**

God knew that **curious children** would ask about the stones stacked by the Jordan. He also knew that children are more likely to learn if they are the initiator of the learning. This “teaching tool” is standardized in the four questions asked during the liturgy for Passover eve. These questions are asked and answered every year, even though everyone but the very youngest knows the answers.

Stone by the tree—Witness

From here we move to the **end of the book of Joshua, to Chapter 24.** Here we find a stone used as a witness.

Once again, the children of Israel are gathered together.

1 Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

And once again, God speaks through Joshua.... Verse 2 begins.....

START IN VERSE 2 AND READ THROUGH VERSE 13

2 Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says:

'Long ago your forefathers, including 13 So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'

At this point Joshua delivers a challenge to the Children of Israel: *In Verse*

14 he begins.....

14 "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

SPEND TIME ON THE MEANING OF THIS COMMON VERSE!

Note how Joshua refers back to the river where the memorial stands. It would not be a stretch to imagine that the image of the stacked stones came into everyone's mind! It is at this point that we find our theme verse. This verse that we find on plaques and key rings was actually a bold declaration and a challenge to a nation prone to backsliding!

In verse 16 the people answered,

"Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! 17 It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. 18 And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God."

Most pastors would be thrilled with that declaration, but.....

19 Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. **20** If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."

Joshua wanted the people to understand that this was not an emotional decision to be taken lightly! He knew them! He wanted them to understand the gravity of their choices! But the people said to Joshua.....

21 , "No! We will serve the Lord."

22 Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord."

And they said....."Yes, we are witnesses,"

Isn't that an interesting way to say that? If someone else makes a decision for how we are going to live our lives, it would be easy to say, "Well, you know that wasn't really my idea." But here, Joshua has brought them to the point of being a witness against themselves should they stray.

And just in case they don't understand what that decision means, he begins to explain:

23 "Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."

24 And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him." CONTINUE

25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. **26** And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God.

I think if he could have taken them all back to the Jordan, he would have reminded of their choice to obey God in crossing the Jordan, but he instead brings the memory of the stone to their present situation.....

Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. 27 "See!" he said to all the people. "This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God."

In this text, the stone has additional purposes beyond being a memorial

- It is a reminder of the words the people said and the covenant they made
- Once again, it is certain that the children will ask questions and parents will be forced to place their lives under the honest and open evaluation of their children.
- And finally, it connects their present with their past.

Personal Memorial and Witness

I dare say that for 99% of this audience, Colorado Springs is not your place of origin. Like the Israelites, God has brought you here—and most of you have crossed over your own personal Jordans in the process. The commitments you made on the other side of the Jordan may have faded somewhat by now.

Maybe you need a memorial that reminds you of how God has provided for you, or maybe a witness stone to remind you of your commitment. As I read the words that God gave Joshua to say, I thought, “What would my words be like?” I think my words from God would say....

“I brought you from the land where once you were honored, but then rejected. I provided a place of ministry where you could continue to serve me. I brought you through car wrecks, loneliness, hurt, disappointment, uncertainty, and endless hours of toil to this place of fulfillment.”

What would your words be? Do you need a reminder in this place that connects to the commitment you made before you came? If you were to place a witness stone in your house, what would you say when your children or friends asked about the stone?

It is interesting that Joshua provided a reminder and made the people declare their commitment three times, just as Jesus provided Peter a reminder and asked for his commitment of love three times. There is just something about humans that requires repetition and renewal.

When I arrived in Colorado Springs, **I drove to campus and parked facing Pikes Peak.** I committed to my ministry here even though my arrival had not gone as planned.

I choose the biggest witness stone I could find, Pikes Peak, and I am reminded of that commitment almost daily.

Once in awhile the fog and clouds hide the mountain and I am tempted to say, like my pastor's daughter, Zoe, when she was three, **“When it's foggy, I can't see God.”**

Then I think of God's words to me and **I am reminded that my commitment** was part of a covenant.

God has always provided and will continue to provide as we walk this journey of life together.