

Joshua 4:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

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

Philippians 3:7-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

One of the most peaceful and amazing places I have ever hiked
 was a trail in Washington State through the Hoh rain forest.

The trail goes into what is called, an old growth forest,
 an area that has never been logged with very old trees.

One characteristic of an old growth forest is a perfectly straight
 row of trees all uniformly spaced and all about the same size,
 that often extends for some 200 feet or more.

That remarkable line of fir trees is telling the story
 of an event that happened hundreds of years earlier.

A Douglas fir can grow to more than 200 feet tall & live 400-600 years.

If you can picture such a tree being blown over by a storm,
 it will of course fall and crash down to the forest floor.

Over time, after many, many decades, it will slowly begin to decay.

Eventually, small seedlings will grow on that rotting tree trunk,
and absorb nutrients from what is then called, **a nurse log.**

Over the many more decades, as the nurse log continues to decay
that log will gradually disappear entirely and leave behind
a perfectly straight line of mature trees in the forest.

That straight line of fir trees is a witness and memorial
to a great windstorm that happened hundreds of years ago.
That is similar to process we read about in the Joshua passage.

The people had been wandering in the wilderness 40 years,
and now at last they were entering the Promised Land.
In a scene reminiscent of crossing the sea before Pharaoh's army,
as the people crossed the Jordan River, they crossed on dry land.

Then Joshua selected someone from each of the 12 tribes of Israel,
to pick up and carry a large stone from the dry river bed
to build an alter wherever they made camp that first night.
It would be a memorial and a witness to the events of that day,
a permanent record, sign and reminder that would stand forever.

Those rounded rocks that had been worn smooth by the flowing water
would be noticeably out of place in the middle of the dry desert,
a full day's walk away from any river or body of water.

So those stones would serve as a visible and constant reminder:
* that God, had heard their desperation in distant Egypt,
* that God, had sustained them through the wilderness,
* that God had brought them into the Promised Land.

Those rocks were souvenirs of hope and God's promise fulfilled.

So for generations to come, seen by someone, especially a child,
they would wonder about the memorial and ask questions about it,
"what are those rounded and smooth river rocks
that memorial, doing way out here in the desert?"

Those stones must have meant something for someone to have placed them there.

Then, the older generation, the people who knew what had happened,
the story of coming through the wilderness to the Promised Land,
they'd have the perfect opportunity to tell the story,
and teach them about God's love & promises fulfilled, 6~7
so that this may be a sign among you. **When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. ... So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.**

Just as nurse logs in an old growth forest
tell the story of a wind storm long ago,
so too the memorial stones of Joshua point to the Exodus story.

A memorial or symbol has meaning to those who know the story behind it

I'm reminded of when the Viet Nam Memorial was dedicated back in 1982.
I happened to have business in downtown DC that week,
so I swung by to see it now that it was open to the public,
and it was an unexpected and powerful experience.

When I got near the memorial site across from the Lincoln Memorial,

the area was packed with veterans gathered together **remembering**...
... some in tears, some in subdued silence and staring at names,
while others shared stories and greeted former comrades
they hadn't seen or spoken to since returning from the war.

In fact, when they returned home, most of them
had never told anybody about what happened during the war
and the stories of their experiences for years went untold.

But for some reason,
when they got to the Viet Nam War Memorial, and they could see
the reflection of themselves in the shiny black panels,
and read the names of fallen comrades they had known—
- a lot of old memories and stories came flooding back to them,
and there was an amazing healing of old wounds
as they remembered and retold their stories.

**That kind of story-telling can be a good and healing experience,
for then the memorial takes on a powerful meaning and message,**
and can help us reflect & make sense of our own life experience.

**Sometimes looking back with a more mature & thoughtful perspective
can help us understand and better discern what really matters most.**

Paul's letter to the Philippians is something like that.
By the time Paul wrote this, he was older and well-seasoned.
He had traveled & endured many long years and miles of ministry.

He's still very passionate, but some of his youthful self-assurance
had been replaced with a more humble and reflective sense of trust
and much more dependent on God's grace rather than in himself.

Having looked back over his life, his accomplishments and mistakes
he's got a better sense of what's truly important and significant.

It's that same perspective of **the wisdom that comes with experience,**
that helps explain the message of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

These are the reflections and teachings of a life-weathered saint,
someone who had drawn closer to the Lord God over the many years.
Having endured struggle and adversity, persecution, attack & loss,
he had learned to trust fully the steadfast faithfulness of God,
the wisdom and goodness, the purpose and sovereignty of the Lord.

The aging Paul isn't asking, did I achieve my goal & was I successful,
but what is really and truly important and most significant?
What in life does matter most and what actually endures?

The situation is that Paul had started the church at Philippi,
but when he had moved on to preach elsewhere, others had followed.

To the relatively inexperienced gentile converts back at Philippi,
these Jewish Christians from Jerusalem seemed very impressive.
They were well-versed with a rich knowledge of Scripture,
and scrupulous in observing Jewish ritual and tradition.

They instructed the spiritually-immature Christians in Philippi,
urging them to become **better Christians beyond Paul's teachings,**
by adding in more effort with more Jewish Law, tradition & ritual,

fostering doubt in Paul's teaching about **the sufficiency of grace as God's free gift that's impossible to earn and is never deserved.**

But Paul knew from his own life and experience that to tie God's gracious love to human effort and behavior was a false and **spiritually destructive** dangerous teaching.

Paul was adamant that what makes us holy and acceptable to God ---
is absolutely not our human effort or our spiritual achievements
but it is solely and purely by God's grace alone.
**Any requirements added beyond simply receiving God's grace,
anything other than seeking to know, love and walk with God
will be a distraction away from what truly matters most.**

So Paul began by pointing out to the believers in Philippi,
who were so impressed & confused by these other teachers,
that he too had an impressive array of Jewish credentials.

But on the road to Damascus as **Saul**, sent to persecute Christians,
Paul was found, claimed, called and renamed by Jesus Christ,
which completely reordered his life, his focus and goals,
away from whatever religious credentials he had achieved,
toward total dependency & trust in God's grace alone.

From then on, all he wanted was to know and grow in Jesus Christ,
which meant dismissing self-achievements he didn't need. vs. 7-8
Yet whatever gains I had, these **I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.** More than that, **I regard everything as loss** because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and **I regard them as rubbish**, in order that I may gain Christ.

Paul was rejecting and throwing out his former credentials **as trash**,
so that instead, he could commit entirely to his walk with Christ.

Paul realized his former religious privileges and accomplishments
were a non-essential burden focused on **ritual not relationship**
and about striving to earn what God had already freely given him.
So he eagerly abandoned it all, in order to gain Christ,
switching from the ladder of the law to the elevator of grace.
Forget that past to better focus on what God is doing now!

It's God desire for us to live free and joyfully fulfilled lives,
not supposing that doing extra Christian chores and deeds
will somehow tip the balance and outweigh the guilt of our sin,
or that God will love us more, **if we are more religious
& more focused on accomplishing even more good works.**

Now, reflecting in prison at the twilight of his life & ministry,
Paul's driving ambition was an ever-closer walk with Christ,
and to unload & ignore all that other religious stuff that hinders
and distracts from having a true & growing relationship with Jesus.

**This is important and critical for us to hear and to understand ---
it's not about the religious information we can acquire,
it's not our mistakes and failures that hold us back,
it's not the success we achieve that raises us up –**

-- but it's the call of Jesus – the power of God's gracious love,
for that alone is what ultimately and truly matters in the end.

Therefore,

Paul says, forget what lies behind – both the good and the bad.
Instead press on ahead, and strain forward on tippy toes
toward whatever God desires and intends for our future,
so our faith can heal and transform, be real and vital.

As Paul explains it, vs. 12-14

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, **I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.**

the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus
The Apostle Paul was all about pressing on toward that goal.

Suppose you are able to achieve exactly what you most want & desire.

**Will it be enough when you look back and honestly evaluate
the values, purpose and meaning of your one and only life?**

Reflecting on your own spiritual journey and your own life of faith,
is growing deeper and closer with Jesus truly **your first priority?**

Is that my driving ambition, or am I settling for something far less?

Is my focus on the right things, on things that really matter most?

God is about healing; deepening and growing our Christian character,
with the assurance & hope that our fears, mistakes & struggles
are never greater than or beyond **the reach of God's grace.**
God is about deepening and growing our faith and Christian character.

Therefore,

we are always being called anew toward hope, healing and renewal,
to a much deeper and more faithful journey as we travel along
this adventure of spiritual development that we call, life,
for we are always in the process of being reshaped and reconfigured.

Looking around at the troubles and strife in our world these days,
we may wonder sometimes why it is that life is so difficult & hard,
and seems to be more about struggle & strife than comfort and ease?

**Maybe it's because God's still got some work to do in us
before we'll be ready to live eternally in heaven's glory.**

In our world and in our lives,

there are many other voices that seek our attention and loyalty,
but we cannot serve the Lord God and compromise with them,
for we are challenged **to live distinctly into God's grace...** vs. 14

... straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

And as God promised through the prophet Isaiah, vs. 43:1, 18~21,

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? **I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...** the people who I formed for myself.