

# Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 4

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## Content & Intent

### This Text — Content

Joshua 4 records the establishment of two stone memorials following Israel's crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground. The LORD commanded Joshua to appoint twelve men — one from each tribe — to carry twelve stones from the middle of the riverbed to the camp at Gilgal (vv. 1–8). Simultaneously, Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan itself, at the place where the priests bearing the ark stood (v. 9). The priests remained in the river until everything the LORD commanded Moses was accomplished and the people had crossed (vv. 10–13). As the priests stepped out of the Jordan, its waters returned to flood stage (vv. 15–18). Israel camped at Gilgal, and Joshua erected the twelve stones there, giving them their explicit meaning: when future generations ask what these stones mean, parents are to answer that the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the LORD — just as the Red Sea was cut off before Israel — so that all peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that Israel may fear the LORD forever (vv. 19–24).

### This Text — Intent

God intends for this passage to establish that His mighty acts in history are not meant to be merely witnessed and then forgotten — they are meant to be *remembered, declared, and transmitted*. The stones are the LORD's instrument for converting a one-time event into perpetual testimony. Through this chapter, God is pressing two interlocking purposes onto Israel and every reader: (1) that the testimony of His power belongs to all peoples of the earth, not only to the generation that crossed; and (2) that covenant memory — passed from parents to children through visible, questioned, answered memorials — is the mechanism by which the fear of the LORD is kept alive across generations. The intent is not primarily to record a miracle but to *conscript the reader into the transmission of that miracle*.

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**Subject Sentence:** Twelve stones at Gilgal — God's commanded memorial of His power across generations.

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**Primary Claim:** God does not leave His mighty acts to be remembered by accident — He commands His people to build structures of memory that will provoke questions, generate testimony, and preserve the fear of the LORD in every generation that follows.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

### **The meaning and purpose of the two sets of stones (vv. 9 and 20)**

A minor interpretive question concerns whether there are one or two memorial installations. Verse 9 records Joshua setting up stones “in the middle of the Jordan,” while verses 20–24 describe the stones at Gilgal. Some interpreters have treated verse 9 as a scribal variant or a duplicate account of the same event. The better reading is that both installations are genuine and intentional — the stones in the riverbed mark the place of the miracle itself (hidden, known only to God and the record of Scripture), while the stones at Gilgal serve the pedagogical and proclamatory function described in verses 21–24. There is no textual warrant for conflation, and the distinction between the hidden memorial and the visible one may itself be theologically significant: God marks events in ways humans cannot always see, and He marks them in ways humans can.

### **The scope of “all the peoples of the earth” (v. 24)**

Some interpreters, particularly within dispensational frameworks, read the universal scope of verse 24 (“so that all the peoples of the earth may know”) as pointing to a future eschatological moment in which Israel’s national restoration will be the vehicle for worldwide knowledge of God. While there is a genuine redemptive-historical trajectory here — the nations figure prominently in the Joshua narrative (cf. Rahab, ch. 2) and in the broader Abrahamic promise — this reading imports a future orientation that the text does not require. The verse’s force is immediate and declarative: the miracle has already happened, the testimony is already being established, and the memorial is already doing its work of universal proclamation. The Reformed reading affirms that God’s acts in Israel’s history are always oriented toward the nations (cf. Ps. 46, Is. 40:5), but this does not require deferring the fulfillment to a later era. The text claims that the stones *are already* the mechanism of worldwide testimony, beginning now. The dispensational reading acknowledges a genuine element — the nations — but overreaches by relocating the fulfillment.

### **Baptism typology and the Jordan crossing**

Some interpreters in the sacramental tradition (and some Baptist/Anabaptist streams) have drawn strong typological connections between the Jordan crossing and Christian baptism, particularly given Paul’s explicit use of the Red Sea crossing in 1 Corinthians 10:1–4. While a redemptive-historical reading that connects water-crossings to new-life and covenant-entrance themes is legitimate and worth noting, the text of Joshua 4 does not itself press toward that application. The chapter’s own stated purpose (vv. 21–24) is memorial testimony and the fear of the LORD — not initiation or entrance rites. The typological connection may be acknowledged at a canonical level without allowing it to displace the chapter’s own primary claim. Preachers should not rush to baptism when the text is asking them to build memorials.

**The Reformed reading:** Joshua 4 is fundamentally about commanded, structured, inter-generational remembrance as the vehicle for the fear of the LORD and the proclamation of God's power to the nations. This reading accounts for both the explicit pedagogy of verses 21–24 and the canonical pattern (Red Sea→Jordan, Moses→Joshua, Exodus→Conquest) within which the chapter deliberately places itself (v. 23).

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## Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 12:24–27** — The Passover is explicitly commanded as an inter-generational memorial with the same question-and-answer structure: “When your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean?’...” The Joshua 4 memorial follows the exact same pedagogical architecture, showing that commanded remembrance structures are a covenant pattern, not a one-time device.
- **Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 20–25** — The Shema and its surrounding commands establish that covenant knowledge must be *active*, *repeated*, and *embedded in household life* — written on doorframes, bound on hands, answered in children's questions. Joshua 4 is the narrative embodiment of Deuteronomy 6's command.
- **Psalms 78:1–8** — The psalmist calls Israel to “tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD,” so that each generation might “set their hope in God and not forget the works of God.” This is the explicit theological warrant for what the stones at Gilgal accomplish.
- **1 Corinthians 11:23–26** — The Lord's Supper functions with the same logic as the Gilgal stones: a physical, repeated, question-provoking memorial of a redemptive act, commanded to be maintained until the LORD's return. “Do this in remembrance of me” stands in direct theological continuity with “When your children ask...”
- **Isaiah 40:3–5** — The universal scope of verse 24 (“all the peoples of the earth”) finds its fullest canonical resolution here: the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and *all flesh shall see it together*. The Jordan testimony is a foretaste of and pointer toward the universal revelation of God's power.

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**Aim:** To move the reader from passive gratitude for God's past acts to active, structured, transmitted testimony — building memorials that outlast the moment and generate the fear of the LORD in the next generation.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                                   | Notes                                                                                                                        |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1–3      | After the crossing, the LORD commands Joshua to choose twelve men, one per tribe, to carry twelve stones from the Jordan’s bed to the camp                | The command originates with the LORD — this memorial is divinely initiated, not humanly devised                              |
| 4–7      | Joshua relays the command; the stones will serve as a sign, and future children’s questions will become occasions for testimony about the Jordan’s cutoff | Verse 7: “these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever” — the purpose is stated immediately              |
| 8        | Israel obeys; the twelve stones are carried to the campsite                                                                                               | Simple obedience recorded without embellishment                                                                              |
| 9        | Joshua erects a second set of twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan itself, where the priests stood                                                   | A second, hidden memorial at the miracle site — cf. interpretive note above                                                  |
| 10–13    | The priests remain in the riverbed until everything is complete; the people hurry across; 40,000 armed men from the eastern tribes cross before the LORD  | The completeness of obedience is emphasized; the eastern tribes honor their commitment (cf. Josh. 1:12–18)                   |
| 14       | The LORD exalts Joshua before all Israel as He had exalted Moses                                                                                          | Leadership transfer established by miracle — echoes Ex. 14:31                                                                |
| 15–18    | The LORD commands the priests to come out; as their feet leave the water, the Jordan returns to flood stage                                               | The miracle is not natural — the water returns immediately upon the priests’ exit, confirming divine control throughout      |
| 19       | Israel camps at Gilgal on the tenth day of the first month                                                                                                | Passover timing: they arrive at Gilgal on the exact day the Passover lamb was to be selected (Ex. 12:3) — a calendrical echo |
| 20–22a   | Joshua sets up the twelve                                                                                                                                 | The stones are not explained                                                                                                 |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                              | Notes                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 22b–23   | stones at Gilgal; commands the future answer to children’s questions<br><br>The explanation: the LORD dried up the Jordan as He dried up the Red Sea | until they are in place — the installation precedes the interpretation<br><br>The explicit connection to Exodus is commanded as part of the answer — this is canonical theology built into the memorial |
| 24       | Two stated purposes: (1) that all peoples of the earth may know the LORD’s mighty hand; (2) that Israel may fear the LORD forever                    | Universal proclamation and covenant devotion are held together as the memorial’s twin goals                                                                                                             |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                                                         |
|----------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 1–8    | The Command: Twelve Men, Twelve Stones, One Memorial          |
| 2        | 9–13   | The Completion: Full Obedience and the Hidden Marker          |
| 3        | 14–18  | The Confirmation: Joshua Exalted, Waters Return               |
| 4        | 19–24  | The Consecration: Stones Set, Meaning Given, Purpose Declared |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** Twelve stones at Gilgal — God’s commanded memorial of His power across generations.

**Primary Claim:** God does not leave His mighty acts to be remembered by accident — He commands His people to build structures of memory that will provoke questions, generate testimony, and preserve the fear of the LORD in every generation that follows.

## Applications (Five)

### **1. (Mind/Belief) — Recognize that forgetting is not passive; it is the default.**

The LORD did not trust Israel to simply remember the Jordan crossing on their own. He commanded the erection of a physical monument specifically because human memory without structure fails. The theological implication is sobering: we are prone not merely to forget God's acts but to live as though they never happened. The stones at Gilgal were not optional devotional enhancement — they were a divine counterattack against the entropy of spiritual memory. Examine your own life: where are you depending on passive gratitude to do the work that only structured, repeated, embodied remembrance can accomplish?

### **2. (Will/Behavior) — Build a deliberate, visible memorial of God's faithfulness in your household.**

The Gilgal stones were *physical, placed, visible, and permanent* — they were designed to be seen and questioned. Application here is concrete: what physical, visible marker of God's faithfulness exists in your home, your family's practice, or your community? The question-and-answer structure of verses 21–24 requires that the memorial be the kind of thing a child or a stranger would actually notice and actually ask about. A vague sense of gratitude is not a stone. This week, build something — an object, a practice, a written record, a recurring family conversation — that someone else will see and be prompted to ask: *What does this mean to you?*

### **3. (Affections/Worship) — Let the pattern “Jordan as the Red Sea” cultivate wonder at God's consistency across your own life.**

The commanded answer in verse 23 explicitly links the Jordan crossing to the Red Sea crossing. God tells Israel not just to remember this miracle but to *connect it* to the prior miracle — to see the pattern of God's faithfulness running through their history. This kind of layered remembrance produces a different quality of worship than isolated gratitude: it produces *confidence in God's character*, not just relief at a single rescue. Where has God acted in your life in ways that echo His earlier acts? The discipline of finding the pattern — “He did it again, as He did before” — is itself an act of faith and a form of worship.

### **4. (Mind/Belief) — The testimony of God's power is not for Israel alone; it is structured for the nations.**

Verse 24 states plainly that one purpose of the Jordan memorial is “so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty.” The stones at Gilgal were not tribal property — they were universal testimony. Christians bear witness to redemptive acts far greater than the Jordan crossing (the cross, the resurrection, the empty tomb) and yet frequently treat that testimony as personal spiritual biography rather than proclamation to a watching world. The stones were not placed in a private room. They were placed at the entrance to the Promised Land, in full view of anyone who passed. Whose questions about your life are you positioned to answer with testimony about the LORD?

## 5. (*Affections/Worship*) — Fear the LORD as the appropriate response to His demonstrated power — not terror, but weightiness and wonder.

The second stated purpose of the memorial in verse 24 is “that you may fear the LORD your God forever.” This is the emotional and devotional telos of the entire installation. The fear of the LORD is not anxious trembling at an unpredictable deity — it is the settled, weighty recognition that you are in relationship with the One who stops rivers, opens seas, and commands stones to speak. Contemporary Christianity frequently domesticates God into a resource and reduces devotional life to comfort-seeking. This passage issues a corrective: the right response to God’s demonstrated power is not merely warmth or gratitude but *fear* — a profound sense of His magnitude and the privilege of belonging to Him. Ask yourself whether the God you worship on Sunday is large enough to have stopped the Jordan.

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### Theological Importance

**Theological Importance:** Joshua 4 teaches that God is not content with being known only by those who witnessed His acts — He is the God who commands the perpetuation of His testimony across time and peoples. The chapter reveals God as the sovereign Lord of natural order (He controls the Jordan as He controlled the Red Sea), the faithful executor of His prior promises (vv. 22–23 explicitly connect to the Exodus covenant), and the God whose purposes are universal in scope (v. 24). It also reveals that God takes the transmission of covenant knowledge with absolute seriousness — the memorial is not a human idea approved by God but a divine command obeyed by Israel. This places the responsibility for inter-generational faith transmission squarely within God’s own initiative and order, not merely within human best practices for religious education.

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### Reformed Theological Significance

**Reformed Theological Significance:** Joshua 4 stands as a paradigmatic text for the Reformed understanding of covenant continuity and the means of grace operating across generations. The question-and-answer structure of verses 21–24 anticipates the covenantal catechetical tradition: the visible sign (stones) prompts the question (what do these mean?), which occasions the answer (what God did in saving His people), which produces the response (fear of the LORD). This is precisely the logic of covenant signs in Reformed theology — baptism and the Lord’s Supper function within the same structure: visible acts that provoke questions and generate proclamation of God’s redemptive power. The passage also grounds inter-generational faith transmission in divine command rather than cultural preference, which gives the Reformed emphasis on catechesis and household worship its theological warrant. Finally, the explicit linkage of Jordan to Red Sea (v. 23) models the canonical hermeneutic that Reformed exposition practices: God’s acts in redemptive history are not isolated events but part of a single unfolding covenant story,

and every new act of grace is to be read in light of the prior acts that establish His character and faithfulness.

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## Main Takeaway

God has never left the transmission of His glory to chance. He commanded Israel to carry stones, set them in view, and be ready to answer when their children asked. The gospel you have received — a crossing far greater than the Jordan — is not yours to keep quietly. Build something that makes people ask. Then tell them exactly what God has done.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to a children's ministry illustration.** Because the text explicitly mentions children asking questions, there is a temptation to preach Joshua 4 as primarily a passage about teaching kids the faith — and to stop there. This is a real and important application, but it captures only one dimension of the passage's purpose. The universal proclamation goal of verse 24 ("all the peoples of the earth") pushes the passage well beyond household catechesis into a theology of public testimony and missionary witness. Preaching that stops at "teach your children" has answered only half of the LORD's stated purpose for the stones.
- **Spiritualizing the memorial away from any physical or structural form.** Some preachers, uncomfortable with the concreteness of the text, translate "build memorials" into purely internal spiritual disciplines — "meditate on what God has done, keep a gratitude journal, remember His faithfulness in prayer." These are legitimate practices but they are not what the text commands. The stones were physical, visible, permanent, and placed where others would see them and ask questions. Application that removes the public and structural dimension domesticates the command.
- **Preaching verse 24 without both halves.** Verse 24 states two purposes: universal knowledge of God's power, and Israel's fear of the LORD forever. Sermons frequently collapse these into a single application or emphasize one at the expense of the other. The universal proclamation purpose (nations knowing God's power) and the covenantal devotion purpose (Israel fearing the LORD) are both essential to the chapter's claim and must both be addressed.
- **Treating the crossing itself as the climax.** Joshua 3–4 spans the miracle and the memorial, and preachers accustomed to narrative preaching may spend the bulk of their time on the drama of the crossing (Josh. 3) and treat chapter 4 as denouement. But chapter 4 is where the passage's own theological purpose is stated — the



crossing was for the stones, not the stones for the crossing. The memorial is not the footnote; it is the point.

- **Missing the Passover timing of verse 19.** The ten days in verse 19 connects Israel's arrival at Gilgal directly to the Passover selection calendar (Ex. 12:3 — the lamb was to be set apart on the tenth day of the first month). This is almost certainly intentional and places the Jordan crossing within the continuing Passover typology. Preaching that ignores this misses a canonical thread that illuminates why the Red Sea/Jordan parallel is explicitly commanded in the answer of verse 23. The crossing is a new Exodus, and the timing seals it.
- **Failing to distinguish structured remembrance from nostalgia.** The stones at Gilgal are not sentimental — they are proclamatory. Nostalgia looks backward for emotional comfort; the memorial at Gilgal looks backward in order to look outward, to the nations, and forward, to the next generation. Preaching that invites people to *feel grateful* for what God has done has not yet arrived at the text's purpose. The passage wants witnesses, not reminiscers.