**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JOSHUA-005. STONES CRYING OUT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. For the priests which bare the ark stood in the midst of Jordan, until every thing was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua: and the people hasted and passed over. 11. And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the Lord passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people. 12. And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spake unto them: 13. About forty thousand prepared for war passed over before the Lord unto battle, to the plains of Jericho. 14. On that day the Lord magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life. 15. And the Lord spake unto Joshua, saying, 16. Command the priests that bare the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan. 17. Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan. 18. And it came to pass, when the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord were come up out of the midst of Jordan, and the soles of the priests feet were lifted up unto the dry land, that the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as they did before. 19. And the people came up out of Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, in the east border of Jericho. 80. And those twelve stones, which they took out of Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal. 21. And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? 22. Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land. 23. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red sea, which He dried up from before us, until we were gone over: 24. 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 for ever."*

*Joshua 4:10-24*

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first (from verses 1 to 14) has as its main subject the bringing up of the twelve memorial stones from the bed of Jordan; the second (verse 15 to the end) gives the conclusion of the whole incident. The plan of arrangement, already pointed out in a former chapter, is very plain in this. Each section has God's commands to Joshua, Joshua's to the people, and the execution of these. To each is appended a summary, which anticipates the more detailed particulars that follow. Our text begins in the middle of the first section, but we must glance at the preceding verses. These tell how, when the people were all across, Joshua, who had apparently remained on the eastern bank with the twelve representatives of the tribes, received God's command to tell these the purpose for which they had been chosen, and to set them to execute it. This additional instruction is the explanation of the apparent discrepancy between Joshua 3:12 and 4:2. Verses 4-8 tell Joshua's communication of the instructions to the men; verse 8 narrates the execution of them by each man's wrenching up from the river's bed a great stone, with which he toiled through the muddy ooze to the western shore, and thence over the hot plain to Gilgal, where the host camped; verse 9 tells that twelve other stones were set up where the priests had stood, and were visible at some time after date, when it was written; but when that was, or whether the verse is part of the original or a later note, we cannot say. At any rate, there were two memorials, one on the bank, one in the stream--a grand jury of great stones, as Thomas Fuller calls them. There is no difficulty in supposing that the monument in the river was firm enough to resist its current, and high enough to be visible either above the surface or beneath the ordinarily shallow water.

**I.** The first picture here brought before us is that of the motionless ark in the midst of what had been Jordan. There is an obvious intention to contrast the stillness of the priests, bearing it on their shoulders, and standing rooted in that strange place all these long hours, with the hurry around. The priests stood ... and the people hasted. However broad the front and swift the march, the crossing must have taken many hours. The haste was not from fear, but eagerness. It was an industrious speed and mannerly quickness, as not willing to make God wait upon them, in continuing a miracle longer than necessity did require. When all were over, then came the twelve and Joshua, who would spend some time in gathering the stones and rearing the memorial in the river-bed. Through all the stir the ark was still. Over all the march it watched. So long as one Israelite was in the channel it remained, a silent presence, to ensure his safety. It let their rate of speed determine the length of its standing there. It waited for the slowest foot and the weariest laggard. God makes His very present help of the same length as our necessities, and lets us beat the time to which He conforms. Not till the last loiterer has struggled to the farther shore does He cease by His presence to keep His people safe on the strange road which by His presence He has opened for them.

The silent presence of the ark is enough to dam up the stream. There is vehement action around, but the cause of it all is in absolute repose. God moves all things, Himself unmoved. He worketh hitherto, and no intensity of energy breaks the depth of His perfect rest. His activity implies no effort, and is followed by no exhaustion. The ark is still, while it holds back a swollen river for hours. The centre of the swiftest revolution is a point of rest.

The form of the miracle was a condescension to weak faith, to which help was ministered by giving sense something to grasp. It was easier to believe that the torrent would not rush down on them when they could look at the priests standing there motionless, with the visible symbol of God's presence on their shoulders. The ark was no more the cause of the miracle than were its carriers; but, just as Jesus helped one blind man by laying moistened earth on his eyes, and another by sending him to Siloam to wash, so God did here. Children learn best when they have something to look at. Sight is sometimes the servant of faith.

We need not dwell on the summary, beginning with verse 11, which anticipates the subject of the next section, and adds that the fighting men of the tribes who had already received their inheritance on the east bank of Jordan, loyally kept their promise, and marched with their brethren to the campaign.

**II.** Verses 15-18 finish the story with the return of the waters to their bed. The triple division appears again. First God commands Joshua, who then transmits the command to the people, who, in turn, then obey. And thus at each stage the divine causality, Joshua's delegated but absolute authority, and the people's prompt obedience, are signalised; and the whole incident, in all its parts, is set forth as on the one hand a conspicuous instance of God's interposition, and, on the other, of Israel's willing service.

We can fancy how the people who had reached the western shore lined the bank, gazing on the group in the channel, who still stood waiting God's command to relieve them at their post. The word comes at last, and is immediately obeyed. May we not learn the lesson to stand fixed and patient wherever God sets us, as long as He does not call us thence? God's priests should be like the legionary on guard in Pompeii, who stuck to his post while the ashes were falling thick, and was smothered by them, rather than leave his charge without his commander's orders. One graphic word pictures the priests lifting, or, as it might be translated, plucking, the soles of their feet from the slimy bottom into which they had settled down by reason of long standing still. They reach the bank, marching as steadily with their sacred burden as might be over so rough and slippery a road. The first to enter were the last to leave the river's bed. God's ark goes before us, and is our rearward. He besets us behind and before, and all dangerous service is safe if begun and ended in Him. The one point made prominent is the instantaneous rush back of the impatient torrent as soon as the curb was taken off. Like some horse rejoicing to be free, the tawny flood pours down, and soon everything looks as aforetime, except for the new rock, piled by human hands, round which the waters chafed. The dullest would understand what had wrought the miracle when they saw the immediate consequence of the ark's leaving its place. Cause and effect seldom come thus close together in God's dealings; but sometimes He lets us see them as near each other as the lightning and the thunder, that we may learn to trace them in faith, when centuries part them. How the people would gaze as the hurrying stream covered up their path, and would look across to the further shore, almost doubting if they had really stood there that morning! They were indeed Hebrews--men from the other side-now, and would set themselves to the dangerous task before them with courage. Well begun is half done; and God would not divide the river for them to thrust them into a tiger's den, where they would be torn to pieces. Retreat was impossible now. A new page in their history was turned. The desert was as unreachable as Egypt, The passage of the Jordan rounded off the epoch which the passage of the Bed Sea introduced, and began a new era.

That parallelism of the two crossings is suggested by the notice of date in verse 19. The tenth day of the first month was just forty years to a day since the first Paschal lamb had been chosen, and four days short of the Passover, which was solemnised at Gilgal (Joshua 5:10) where they encamped that night. It was a short march from the point of crossing, and a still shorter from Jericho. It would have been easy to fall upon the invaders as they straggled across the river, but no attempt was made to dispute the passage, though, no doubt, many a keen pair of eyes watched it from the neighbouring hills. In the beginning of the next chapter we are told why there was this singular supineness. Their heart melted, neither was there spirit in them any more, or, in more modern language, panic laid hold of the enemy, and they could not pluck up courage to oppose the advance of Israel. If we add this result to those mentioned in chapter in., we find sufficient motive for the miracle to take it out of the class of purposeless, legendary wonders. Given the importance of Israel as the depositaries of revelation, there is nothing unreasonable in a miracle which so powerfully contributed to their conquest of Canaan, and we have yet to learn that there is anything unreasonable in the belief that they were the depositaries of revelation. The fundamental postulate of the Old Testament is a supernatural revelation, and that opens the door for any miracle needful for its accomplishment. It is folly to seek to conciliate by minimising the miraculous element. However much may be thrown out to the wolves, they will not cease to pursue and show their teeth. We should be very slow to pronounce on what is worthy of God; but any man who believes in a divine revelation, given to the world through Israel, may well believe in such a miracle as this at such a moment of their history.

III. The memorial stones (verses 20-24). Gilgal, the first encampment, lay defenceless in the open plain, and the first thing to be done would be to throw up some earthwork round the camp. It seems to have been the resting-place of the ark and probably of the non-combatants, during the conquest, and to have derived thence a sacredness which long clung to it, and finally led, singularly enough, to its becoming a centre of idolatrous worship. The rude circle of unhewn stones without inscription was, no doubt, exactly like the many prehistoric monuments found all over the world, which forgotten races have raised to keep in everlasting remembrance forgotten fights and heroes. It was a comparatively small thing; for each stone was but a load for one man, and it would seem mean enough by the side of Stonehenge or Carnac, just as Israel's history is on a small scale, as compared with the world-embracing empires of old. Size is not greatness; and Joshua's little circle told a more wonderful story than its taller kindred, or Egyptian obelisks or colossi.

These grey stones preached at once the duty of remembering, and the danger of forgetting, the past mercies of God. When they were reared, they would seem needless; but the deepest impressions get filled up by degrees, as the river of time deposits its sands on them. We do not forget pain so quickly as joy, and most men have a longer and keener remembrance of their injurers than of their benefactors, human or divine. The stones were set up because Israel remembered, but also lest Israel should forget. We often think of the Jews as monsters of ingratitude; but we should more truly learn the lesson of their history, if we regarded them as fair, average men, and asked ourselves whether our recollection of God's goodness to us is much more vivid than theirs. Unless we make distinct and frequent efforts to recall, we shall certainly forget all His benefits. The cultivation of thankful remembrance is a very large part of practical religion; and it is not by accident that the Psalmist puts it in the middle, between hope and obedience, when he says that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments (Psalm 78:7).

The memorial stones further proclaimed the duty of parental instruction in God's mercies. They speak of a time when tradition was the vehicle of history; when books were rare, and monuments were relied upon to awaken curiosity which a father's words would satisfy. Notwithstanding all differences in means of obtaining knowledge, the old law remains in full force, that the parent is the natural and most powerful instructor in the ways of God. The Jewish father was not to send his child to some Levite or other to get his question answered, but was to answer it himself. I am afraid that a good many English parents, who call themselves Christians, are too apt to say, Ask your Sunday-school teacher, when such questions are put to them. The decay of parental religious teaching is working enormous mischief in Christian households; and the happiest results would follow if Joshua's homely advice were attended to, Ye shall let your children know.

The same principle which led to the erection of this simple monument reaches its highest and sacredest instance in the institution of the Lord's Supper, in which Jesus, with wonderful lowliness, condescends to avail Himself of material symbols in order to secure a firmer place in treacherous memories. He might well have expected that such stupendous love could never be forgotten; but He knoweth our frame, and trusts some share in keeping His death vividly in the hearts of His people to the humble ministry of bread and wine, Strange that we should need to be reminded of the death which it is life to remember! Blessed that, needing it, we have the need so tenderly met, and that He does not disdain to accept loving memories which slumber till stirred by such poor reminders of His unspeakable love!