

Our Changeless Lord's Instructions On How To Use Teachable Moments

Series our Changeless Lord (5th Message of 5)

by Ron R. Ritchie

In this series of messages we have been learning that although we live in a rapidly-- changing world, a fickle, unstable and very confusing world, yet, in the midst of this sea of uncertainty, with its constantly changing values and traditions, we have a faithful, changeless Lord who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

God did not create the earth and the people to populate it and then walk away and yell out over his shoulder, "Best of luck!" No, that is not the kind of God we have. Our God is Yahweh, I AM. He is involved with us; he is personally present, providing all the resources we need to live this life. He chose Israel for his namesake so that the whole world would see who he is, and to display all the joy which he offered in his plan of redemption. He later chose the church and the Yahweh of the New Testament, Jesus Christ, to present his plan of salvation so that through the church all may know who he is. Both Israel and the church, therefore, are to be salt and light in every generation until he comes again.

We have been learning in our study of various psalms that if we want to be able to withstand the fickle winds of change in this society we must go back to the Scriptures. There we will discover the will of our changeless Lord for us in this changing society. In Psalm 33 we saw that God's Word is upright; his works are faithful; he is a lover of righteousness and justice; and he extends his mercy to all who place, their faith in him.

In Psalm 128 we discovered that the family is one area where we desperately need guidance. In order to show his love towards mankind and so that mankind could demonstrate their love for each other, God created the family unit. As husbands and wives and children interact righteously they are symbols of all kinds of spiritual lessons with which God wants to permeate society. In that psalm we learned that these principles which God designed are relevant for every culture and for every generation until he comes again. God will not change his mind. He will not say one thing one day and change it the next. In Psalm 128 Yahweh's word to husbands is, "Fear the Lord and walk in his ways." But man's word is like the wind, which changes at every turn.

In Psalm 127 learned of our changeless Lord's instructions to married couples. Blessings would flow into their lives when couples chose to allow the Lord to build their house, to provide their security, to provide their needs; and when they allowed the Lord to fill their quiver with children. Those are the keys to blessing for a married couple.

In Psalm 78 we discovered our changeless Lord's instructions to parents. The parents' responsibility is to teach each generation with three generations in view to praise the Lord; to teach them of the strength and of the wondrous works of the Lord; and to teach them to put their confidence in God so their children will put their confidence in God, so their children will put their confidence in God, and so on down through the ages until he comes again. We are to set them free from this "Me" society that cannot see beyond today, this society that thinks that when it dies the whole world dies with it. Our children are living testimony to the fact that God has given us a very significant part to play in his plan of redemption throughout the ages. My righteousness in God's strength in my generation will have a tremendous effect on my yet unborn grandchildren whom God already knows by name and by ministry.

When we talk about teaching our children all these things, the question, Where can we Christian parents get time to do this in view of the constant interruptions our modern world is forcing upon us? naturally arises. I don't know about you, but I sometimes think I've embarked on a new career_that of a full-time taxi driver! My wife definitely thinks she has. How in the world can we teach truth to our children when all we do is race home from work, run down to a fast food chain (because there's no time to cook dinner), gobble up some

food that's absolutely no good for us and take off again to football practice, baseball practice, ballet practice, riding practice, swimming practice? And not only do you have to take your children there, you've got to go pick them up and bring them home again. You spend your whole day looking at your watch.

On Saturday I asked my son where he had to go that day. "I've got two football sessions today," he told me, "the first is at 10:30 a.m." "OK," I said, "what time do I pick you up?" "Five thirty," he said. Five--thirty! I had to work my whole day around taking him to football practice and bringing him home. Then we have the week--end events--Marine world, Great America. That's where my son is right now--at Great America. Look who's got his interest. Summer camp? He had two in a row this year. He got back from the first camp, washed his clothes, and then headed out for the next one.

How are we going to communicate spiritual truth to this generation that will affect the next three generations in this three--ring circus world we're living in? Well, our beautiful Lord gives us wisdom on how to live in this three--ring circus. You see, all those times when we're going back and forth with our children are just loaded with teachable moments, incredibly rich moments that we can buy up by the wisdom that God gives us. For example, on Tuesday last I had a typically busy day. I had my younger son with me all day, and he sat in that evening with a group of men I'm discipling. Later, we all went out to dinner and the guys talked to him, made him feel at home and bought his dinner for him. At 11.00 p.m. as we were driving home together, he asked me several questions about how I choose the men who study with me, etc. Then, after a long pause, he asked, "Dad, did you ever think where would you be if you weren't here, like, if you weren't born?" What a wonderful leading question! I just took off on that one--we were born, we are here, this is why we're here, etc. I spend all my time with my children waiting for those teachable moments. Children give you leads all day long and you have to buy them up. And these don't have to be long sermons. (I remember the day my boys said to me, "Is this going to be a long one?")

One of the most beautiful illustrations of a teachable moment is found in chapter 4 of the Book of Joshua. In this story we have our Lord's instructions to us on how to use one of those moments. The story has three movements:

- (1) Stones on the West Bank (verses 1-8);
- (2) Stones in the middle of the river (verse s 9-18);
- (3) Stones in Gilgal (verses 19-26).

1. Stones On The West Bank (verses 1-8)

Now it came about when all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan, that the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight.' " So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the sons of Israel, one man from each tribe; and Joshua said to them, "Cross again to the ark of the Lord your Cod into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel. Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever." And thus the sons of Israel did, as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, just as the Lord spoke to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel; and they carried them over with them to the lodging place, and put them down there.

The background to this story is that by now Moses is dead. For the Israelites, the forty year wilderness journeys are behind them, and they are standing on the east bank of the flooded Jordan River. Joshua has been picked by God to be their leader, but he doesn't want the job. He has been following Moses for forty years, ever since the days of Egypt, and he has just got himself together as a follower. But god tells him, "I've

chosen you. I am with you." Joshua says, "'That's a different story. I'll go with you then. As long as you're with me I don't mind being a leader, but don't leave me alone e cause I'm fearful; I have no courage.

In chapter 2 Joshua had sent spies up to Jericho, a fortified city with many warriors on the other side of the Jordan River. They were to spy out what the opposition was going to be like in the Promised Land the Israelites were about to enter after 700 years. From Rehab, the spies discovered that the hearts of the people of Jericho had already melted, as they had heard of the Israelites' earlier crossing of the Red Sea and other miracles.

In chapter 3, therefore, Joshua told the priests to place the ark of the covenant on their shoulders and walk 1,000 yards before the nation of Israel. The ark was a symbol of the very presence of God. It was a wooden box which housed the Ten Commandments, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament (a symbol of God's desire that we have his word in our hearts), the manna (which is the symbol of God's provision for us of the Bread of Life), and Aaron's rod 'a dead staff of wood which had budded as a sign confirming Aaron's authority as High Priest, and which is a symbol of resurrection out of death , of life from death). As soon as you put your feet in the water, Joshua told the priests, God is going to do something. What followed, of course, was that God divided the Jordan River at flood--tide Joshua 3:15 16 says

and when those who carried the ark came into the Jordan, and the feet of the priests carrying the ark were dipped in the edge of the water for the Jordan overflows all its banks all the days of harvest, that the waters which were flowing down from above stood and rose up in one heap, a great distance away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan; and those which were flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. So the people crossed opposite Jericho.

Two million people of the second generation of those who left Egypt crossed into the Promised Land, and two people of the first generation, Joshua and Caleb, crossed, because they did not sin against God. Joshua stands watching all the people come across totally amazed at what God has done. Meanwhile, his enemies five miles up to the west are standing on the walls of the city of Jericho, watching in horror, fear and disbelief, as two million people cross over on the now dry river bed.

Then they see this strange sight: Joshua instructs twelve men, one man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, to go into the Jordan and pick up stones and place them on their shoulders and bring the stones to a place where the Israelites will lodge that night. Let this be a sign among you, Joshua tells them. These stones were to serve a fourfold purpose: one, that the Israelites had just crossed on dry land from the wilderness, a place where their fathers lived in unbelief. Joshua is saying, "We do not have to live that way any more. These stones will be a sign that as we go to the Promised Land and take hold of all that God has for us, we will know that although the River Jordan was in flood, yet God overruled that impossible situation in the most amazing way."

The second sign they would serve was that their children would ask, "What do these stones mean?" That is the nature of children. We need to work diligently to present to our children truth through memorial stones in our lives so that when they see them and touch them we can tell them about how God has worked. Those are the teachable moments we need.

Third, Joshua says, "We will know that these stones are here because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord." For seven hundred years, ever since the days of Abraham, the nation of Israel had waited for this moment. Finally, two million people walked on dry land into the land of promise. Are you willing to live your life so that your descendants, seven hundred years from now, can enjoy the blessings that God has prepared for them? Our struggle is that we can't think in terms of seven days, don't mind seven hundred years. We have lost our sense of history, our sense of reality from God's perspective. We have bought the world's system, the "Me" society. I beg of you to make the choice to get out of it and be set free to see who you are in God's sight.

Fourth, Joshua says that the stones would become a memorial to their sons forever. You see, God doesn't change. What he accomplished at the Jordan, where he invaded time and space and overcame apparently

impossible circumstances, he can accomplish again. He can divide the waters and march us into this new land. When we are filled with doubt and discouragement, when we don't think God is answering anymore, when we feel the heavens are brass we need to have memorial stones we can touch so that we can remember, "Yes, these stones came from the middle of the over. flowing river. We brought them out of the river to remind us that God is faithful even in the most impossible situations." We are human beings, made of flesh and blood. We need to have things to touch 50 that we can relate to events, and so that our children too can touch them.

When my wife and I first got married we took a great step of faith. We were brand new Christians, living in North Africa, and we decided to come back to the United States and go to school as we wanted to serve the Lord. Materially, we had nothing. We moved in with my mother and then moved right out because that's just not the thing to do with a new bride. I found an apartment and told my wife, "Honey, I've found a place to live but we have nothing to put in it." But we didn't care. What is it about being young and married? I guess it's that you have no sense. But you have a lot of fun! That seems to be the key. And you have a lot of faith, a lot of optimism. So we moved in. It took about ten minutes! We didn't need a U-Haul van or a bunch of friends to move us. We slept on the floor, ate off an ironing board, but it was home. Then someone gave us a mattress, someone else brought a spring, and someone gave us a bed-frame, then a couch. Soon afterwards someone gave us a cabinet. That was all we needed. I have never forgotten those days, because, as far as I was concerned, God had provided in the most impossible situation. You can see that cabinet in my home today. You could not buy it from me. That cabinet will go on to my children. Every night when I eat dinner I look at it and remember how God provided in the most marvelous way. We need to have those stones, those rock piles for our children to touch.

2. Stones In The Middle Of The River (verses 9-18)

Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day. For the priests who carried the ark were standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything was completed that the Lord had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. And the people hurried and crossed; and it came about when all the people had finished crossing, that the ark of the Lord and the priests crossed before the people. And the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle array before the sons of Israel, just as Moses had spoken to them; about 40,000, equipped for war, crossed for battle before the Lord to the desert plains of Jericho. On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life. Now the Lord said to Joshua. "Command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that they come up from the Jordan." So Joshua commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan." And it came about when the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord had come up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lined up to the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before.

Three things happened here. After Joshua had the twelve stones set up, he personally walked out to where the priests were standing the middle of the river and gathered up twelve more stones and placed them in the middle of the Jordan. Then he told the priests come up on the bank, and as soon as they did so the water came down again and went back to its natural flow.

Now what is the point of all this? Well, in the future, when children asked their fathers why the stones were placed at the Israelites lodging place, parents would have an opportunity to share about the time when, in a seemingly impossible situation, God took them across the dry river bed. Some children, of course, would respond. "Sure, dad. How do I know you didn't just put those rocks there and make up that story?" Then the father could say, "No, I didn't make up that story, and to prove it, look out in the middle of the river. Do you see that other pile of rocks? How do you think they got there? We put them out there after God dried up the flooded river. They are there to this day to remind you that we walked across that river and don't you forget it. God can provide in the most impossible circumstances. Those rocks are proof of that."

We humans are so skeptical; so unbelieving. That is part of our make-up. One astonishing proof of that is

today, less than forty years after the Holocaust when millions of Jews were killed by Hitler, there's a whole generation of people who need to be reminded that these horrible things actually happened. A couple of months ago the survivors of the concentration camps gathered in Israel so that the world could see that the Holocaust really happened. One Jew at the ceremony pointed to a number tattooed on his wrist and said, "These hands have thrown more bodies into the ovens than this mind is capable of counting or remembering. It did not happen?" he asked, incredulously, "It did not happen?" (A group of professors in Los Angeles have written articles claiming it did not.)

Our sons too will say that the miracles worked by God in our lives did not happen if we do not remind them that God is indeed working in our lives. Do you ever wonder about how sin in your life has kept you from our lives. And the way we can do that is to have memorial stones to wandering in the wilderness? How many years could you have been showing them tangible proof of his blessings. In the good land had you not wandered, had you not lived in unbelief? Do you ever think about how many hours and days you wasted sucking your thumb in your room by yourself in unbelief feeling sorry for yourself, when you could have been in the promised land enjoying all the fruits that God had for you? I always think like that. But God has taken my life and changed it and he is using it for his honor and glory. I'm just like a spectator in this process. With my background I can't believe that God would let me preach his Word. But he has.

The second thing that's happening is described in verse 12:

And the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle array before the sons of Israel, just as Moses had spoken to them;

The background to this event is in Numbers chapter 32. These three tribes got to the eastern bank of the Jordan and found that the grass was so good (they being cattlemen) that they told Moses, "Go ahead without us. We'll stay here." Moses said, "Do you want to be like your fathers who went to spy out the land which God was giving us and came back and discouraged the people? God let all of the first generation perish because of that kind of attitude." So these men had a meeting, and afterwards they said to Moses, "How about if we build cities here for our children and pens for our livestock? We will arm ourselves and go before the sons of Israel, and we will not return to our homes until every one of them has possessed his inheritance." Moses agreed with that plan, and now 40,000 of these men equipped for war cross the Jordan. They are going to have to fight for the next 25 years!

The third thing that happened is that

On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they revered him,

Joshua is one of the most amazing characters in Scripture. I hope you will become familiar with his life story. His name means, "Jehovah is salvation" (the Hebrew word for Jesus). Joshua never wanted to be leader of the Israelites but God anointed him, and God said he would be with him. When Moses died, I'm sure the first generation must have said, "What will we do now without our leader?" But God said, "You don't do anything. I'm in charge. It's my programme. I'm the one who's doing the redeeming. I chose the nation of Israel. Whoever gave you the vote? There is no decision-making involved here. Your only decision is to follow me. I'll provide the leader and I'm going to choose Joshua." You can imagine their response to that news: "Joshua? But he's afraid of his own shadow. He doesn't want to be a leader. But I do. I'm qualified." When Moses died, however Joshua was the leader chosen by God. When Ray and I were in London a couple of years ago we visited Westminster Abbey. There we saw a plaque in memory of John Wesley that said, "God buries his hut God carries on his work." We don't have to worry about who is in charge. God is running the programme of redemption.

3. Stones In Gilgal (verses 19-24)

Now the people came up from Jordan on the tenth of the first month and camped at Gilgal on the eastern edge of Jericho. And those twelve stones which they had taken

from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the sons of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones' then you shall inform your children, saying, 'Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever."

The tenth day of the first month was the very day the Israelites celebrated Passover. They could have left Egypt just after the first Passover and been in the Promised Land for the second one, but because of the sin of unbelief they spent 39 Passovers in the wilderness of unbelief. Joshua, however, is now starting all over again with this new generation. He wants them to walk by faith, trusting Yahweh for the fruit of his promises.

By setting the twelve stones up in Gilgal, Joshua wants the Israelites to remember three things. He reviews the message of the stones for them: "Listen, children, I know it's hard to believe, but we did cross the Jordan River, on dry land. That's the first thing." I lived by the Delaware River in Bristol, Pa., once. When that river was at high tide everyone knew it; and when it was at low tide we kids had to wait a long time before going out on the river bed to see what the low tide had unearthed. You know why we had to wait? Because there was mud up to our knees. Now it fascinates me that when God caused the river to go up in a heap the river bed totally dried up. If it hadn't, those two million people would still be there today slipping and sliding their way across. You'd better believe that everyone in Jericho knew the Israelites crossed on dry land.

The second thing Joshua wants them to remember is "that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is might" (verse 24). The Canaanites were held captive by Satan, by their idols, by superstition and by fear; they were held captive by gods who could not answer their requests. God is telling the Israelites, "I want your children to see that these stones are a representation of my mighty hand which can overcome all apparently impossible circumstances. All we have to do is tell God what the circumstances are. He will divide the waters and we will go through on dry land." Joshua wants the people to know that the hand of the Lord is mighty because at the very moment they were trying to figure out how they were going to get across the river, a woman up in Jericho, Rahab, had become a follower of Yahweh. Those are two of the reasons God brings teachable moments into our lives--to show our children how God has worked in our own lives, and to show them that the mighty hand of God is extended to all the peoples of the earth.

The third reason Joshua set the memorial stones in Gilgal is. "So that you may fear the Lord your God forever." "I don't want you to fear your enemies, the fortified cities, the mighty armies, or the idols of Canaan," Joshua says. "I don't want you to fear anyone but Yahweh, the only true living God. When you get discouraged in the days ahead as you face thirty--two kings in your attempt to conquer this land, I want you to come back and touch these stones. God is just as real as these stones, and he will work in our lives."

God has left Christians some memorial stones to commemorate his overcoming impossible circumstances. In the Lord's supper we remember that he died and was buried and rose again, according to the Scriptures. Another memorial stone he left with us is baptism--physical baptism, representing our new life in Christ and our identification with him. We all know someone right now of whom we can say, "I can't believe God will ever save that person!" Guess what? That's a pushover for God. It's as easy as crossing a river in flood. We need to rest in that and depend upon God to work.

In your life what are some of the physical, emotional and spiritual memorial stones representing apparent impossible circumstances where Yahweh rolled back the waters so that you could walk over on dry land and begin to enjoy the fruit of his promises which he has given to us in Christ Jesus? What are the circumstances in your life by which the world can recognize that the hand of the Lord is mighty and that our hearts are filled with respect for him? What are some of the "physical" stones we have on display so that our children seeing them and touching them can ask, "What do these stones mean?" I encourage you parents to start diligently arranging your lives so that your children can indeed see and touch such memorial stones in your homes. Thereby you can share your life, share how God overcame the most impossible situation and set you and your loved ones free to walk across a flooding river on dry land. I encourage you to use those teachable moments to prepare the next generation and the next generation and the next generation to follow Yahweh, Jesus Christ,

our Lord and wonderful Savior.

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Joshua 4
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