

Teachable Moments

by Ron R. Ritchie

My wife has brought me many joys. One of the richest has been the influence of her background. She was raised in North Africa, in a country which is predominantly Arab, and yet she lived near a Jewish community. She herself is French, having an Italian mother and a French father. All this makes an intriguing life for me. I enjoy this culture which is hers, and the people with whom she has surrounded herself through the years.

Another joy that she has brought to our life together is our children, our sons Ron and Rod. Together we have sought ways and means to communicate truth to our children and to share our backgrounds and experiences with them. My five-- year-- old loves caviar, so we're going to boycott meat this week and eat caviar! My older son loves art, loves to work with his hands. He has picked this up by watching Mom and Dad. He is also sensitive to the things of the Lord. We didn't think that our younger son was sensitive until we watched him help us to babysit for a little friend of his and we saw a son who I thought didn't care about anybody become a "mother hen" almost overnight as he protected and guarded this little child. So God has given us the blessings of background and truth, and we are to pass these on to one another and then to our sons in order to give them strength and courage for today and tomorrow, to give them hope, direction, and guidance.

I have asked myself, "What has my wife brought to me that I use consistently, that encourages me and gives me new eyes?" One of the things that I remembered, among many, was the night a few years ago when we were watching a television program about Israel. The land was blooming, and there were citrus fruits everywhere. The oranges were full and ripe, the olive trees were beautiful. Suddenly I looked over and saw the: my wife was crying. I thought, "What in the world is there about an orange tree which brings tears?" I said, "Honey what's wrong?" She said, "Oh, Ron, these are tears of joy." I said, "What do you mean?" She told me, "A few months ago, some people came around to the office and they were taking up a collection to buy trees for Israel. Hon, I bought a tree, and I'll bet it's one of those. And it gives me great joy!"

I started to realize then how much she has influenced me to have new eyes toward the Jewish people, toward their way of life in this present time as well as in the past. She has influenced me to such an extent that, without really understanding what is going on, I find myself buying and reading each month a magazine from Israel, printed in downtown Jerusalem. I find that I have just finished O Jerusalem, a best seller about the struggle of Israel during the years from 1947 through 1960. I find that we surround ourselves with Jewish friends, and that they frequently give me phonograph records about their background. They want to share it with me. And Carl Dake came home from Jerusalem recently with a brand new record of Israeli songs and chants.

I find that I'm drawn to Fiddler On The Roof. What did the main character, Tevye, say? He said, "Tradition! It is so important to have tradition!" They were experiencing difficult times in Russia, and it was the tradition which was the cohesive force which held them together inside, when it looked as though everything were falling apart outside. Do you remember when they sat around the table as a family and lit the candles? They were in utter poverty, but they lit the candles and they worshipped Jehovah God, and they remembered what he did, and they praised him. When I watched that scene I thought, "What do I, as a father, have to offer my children which would be a cohesive force for them? Do we have traditions like this in our home which I could teach my children, and in which year in and year out we can participate together?"

Of course I recognize that there is a false tradition, a tradition which can be very destructive, because it comes from the minds of men. But then there is the tradition of which Paul speaks, when he encourages his people to "listen to the things which I taught you from the fathers"-- because God Almighty taught the fathers. That tradition is the tradition we are speaking of today -- the precepts and the customs and the stories which come from God, through his prophets, through his people.

One of the stories which helps us to think through the things which are important in holding us together during difficult times is that of Joshua and the episode at the Jordan River. The account is found in Joshua 4. Joshua's name is most interesting. His original name in the wilderness was Hoshea, which simply meant "salvation". But Moses changed his name to Joshua -- "Jehovah is salvation". It is fascinating to me that in Greek that means "Jesus saves".

In chapter I of the book of Joshua, Moses has died and Joshua is left in command of two million men and their families. They have just come out of the wilderness, and Joshua has been through all kinds of experiences with them and has watched Moses lead. But Moses has died, and God appears to Joshua and says, "Joshua, I'm with you. As I was with Moses I will be with you. Every place on which you place your foot will be yours. Every battle I place you in will be won. Jericho is yours. Only be strong and of good courage." Three times he says to Joshua, "Be strong and full of courage, for I am with you. "

So Joshua obeys God, and in chapter 2 he sends two spies into the land of Canaan and tells them, "Go check the land and come back with a report. (He obviously has learned something from his experience forty years earlier when he and Caleb had gone in with ten other and had been outvoted when they returned!) The spies run right back after meeting Rehab, a prostitute in the city of Jericho, and say, "Joshua, you won't believe it! We met a gal in Jericho who said, 'Hey, where have you been! We were waiting for you forty years ago. Our hearts melted when we heard that you came across the Red Sea. We were expecting you then. Where were you?'" So Joshua is encouraged because he recognizes that God is with him.

Then in chapter 3 God tells Joshua to have the priests take the Ark of the Covenant down to the river. This Ark was a symbol of the very presence of God. It was a wooden box within which were kept the Ten Commandments -- the second set, the first being broken by Moses because of anger -- 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.

So Joshua asks the priests to go down to the river's edge with the Ark, and then as they touch the river Jordan, the water sweeps back and allows the two million men and their families to go across. If you have been in that area you realize that the original site of Jericho is some five miles up the hill from the river and that from it you can look down and actually see the river. So you can imagine the activity on the walls of Jericho as the inhabitants watched not only the river, which was in flood at the time, being cut off some five or six miles upstream, but then two million of the enemy, from their point of view, coming across. It must have had a tendency to cut into their sense of security! Rehab was there and knew about what was happening, but she was secure because the spies had told her that because of her belief she and her family would be spared.

Now we come to chapter 4. It interests me to see how God talks to Joshua, Joshua talks to the people, and the people obey. What a fantastic relationship! My, how God's heart must have been blessed to know that he could simply speak and the people would obey! I know my heart -- I wish it were that simple for me!

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.'" [This refers to Gilgal, which will be their base camp as they conquer the promised land.] 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 God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number [twelve] of the tribes of the sons of Israel. "

What happened was that all the nation had crossed over, but the priests and the ark were standing on the dry ground in the middle of the riverbed. And Joshua sent twelve men back down there to get the stones.

Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later [and they will], saying, 'What do these stones mean to you ?' ... "

You see, the question is not "What do these stones mean to your children?" but first, "What do these stones mean to you?" For if truth is not penetrating your mind and working its way out through your heart, then how can you share truth with someone else? Every one of us knows how empty it sounds when we hear someone talking about truth which is not happening in their own life. So he says to these twelve men, "When your children ask you, you will be able to explain it to them because you were here, because you have passed through the Jordan. You will have a reality to speak of, so share it with your children."

"... then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord [the very presence of God]; 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. "

I used to think that "forever" meant just until the history of this world is over... until I read in Revelation about the new heaven and the new earth. But the same truth will prevail forever. The millions of people who were at the Jordan will tell you forever about what happened there. They will share it. They will never forget it. They'll say, "You would have to have been there to understand what we're sharing. God worked in an impossible situation!"

Then in verses 8 through 14, simply, God then tells Joshua to go down into the riverbed, take twelve stones, and build a monument within the middle of the river, at the feet of the priests. And Joshua is held in high esteem from this day forth. We'll pick up the story in verse 15:

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 that 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 lifted up to the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before.

No bridges; they came over on dry land. But they could have told their sons, "Son, we came across the Jordan on dry land." And the sons would have smirked, "Sure you did, Dad; of course you did. If you say you came across on dry land, you came across on dry land -- you're Dad." But God had anticipated that unbelief and had said, "Joshua, I want you to put a pile of stones in the middle of the river so that when the waters come back some will be left sticking up." For then the sons would say, "Hey, Dad, who put the stones in the middle of the river?" And Joshua would be able to say, "Funny you should mention it! Son, I put those stones there. I put them there to teach you that God works in impossible situations. And there are some other things I want to teach you, too." Watch this, in verses 19 and following:

Now the people came up from the 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.

The tenth day of the first month was the very same day on which they had celebrated the Passover in Egypt forty years earlier. The forty years in the wilderness were really unnecessary. But because of disobedience they had to start again, so they started again by celebrating the Passover, the time of remembrance. Verses 21 through 23:

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....'"

Many times when we read these stories we simply go on to the next chapter. But because God has blessed us

with sons, I have come to understand the characteristics of sons, to a point, and I am aware of their fantastic curiosity. So I started to think about this story, and I tried to visualize, from God's point of view, what in the world really goes on in the minds of sons. And I have noticed that whenever God teaches any of us a lesson, whenever he gives us a new truth, he asks us first to live it out -- before we pass it on.

So I can imagine a day when Joshua is at Gilgal after a few years have gone by, and one of his sons has grown to a degree of maturity wherein he is free to ask his dad some important questions about life. I can hear him saying, "Hey, Dad, excuse me. What are the stones all about? I see that the people keep coming back to Gilgal, I see them pointing out to the stones in the middle of the river, but I guess I just never got around to asking you. What do they mean?" And I see this as a fantastic "teachable moment", a moment such as is given to you and me by God, a moment for you to seize upon and to use in order to strengthen and encourage your children.

Joshua understood that the stones were there not just for his own encouragement but for the encouragement of his children, generation after generation after generation. He understood that they were the basis of a tradition which would be a cohesive force that would hold them together as a family faithful to God. He could tell them many personal stories, but they would all have in common a definite line of truth which ran through them all: that God is the God of the impossible. God takes impossible situations and brings victory out of them.

So I can hear Joshua saying to his son, "Son, I thought you would never ask, but let me tell you what the stones mean. You see, Son, you had a great granddaddy whose name was Abraham. And Abraham came out of the city of Ur, directed by God, because God said to him, 'If you trust me, I will make you a great land, I will give you a great name, and I will give you children like the sands of the sea.' And so Abraham believed God and came out. And he said to God, 'God, that's a great promise, and I trust you. But you know how old we are, and we can't have children.' And God said, 'I'll take care of the Children Let me produce the children.' An impossible situation. And Sarah had a child, and his name was Isaac, 'Laughter', for Sarah had laughed in the tent when the angel had told Abraham, 'Next year at this time you will have a son.'

"And, my boy, Isaac grew in wisdom and maturity. He got married and had two sons, Jacob and Esau.-- And God favored Jacob. Jacob's name means 'Striving', or 'Crafty One'. And after God got finished with Jacob, wrestled with him one night and won, he changed his name to Israel, the name of our nation, Son. It means, 'One Who Strives With God'. And Israel had twelve sons. And, my boy, that's where we get the names of our tribes-- one nation, twelve tribes, each coming from one of the twelve sons.

"And, my son, they were living with their father in the land of Palestine. They got jealous of their youngest brother, Joseph, and sold him, and he was taken down to Egypt. And yet God blessed. A famine came, and they all had to go down to Egypt for food. And when they got there, suddenly it was revealed to them that Joseph happened to be the Vice President of the country and was in charge of the wheat. And so we, all our ancestors, stayed there with Joseph, and as long as he was alive we were blessed.

"But then there came a time when the Pharaohs did not know Joseph or our God, and we were forced into heavy bondage. But you know, as I think back, the bondage was really beneficial to us as a nation, for we learned how to raise sheep, and how to build buildings, and how to get together and worship. And we were protected from our enemies, though we didn't recognize it at the time. And we were able to endure until God said it was time to leave Egypt, after 400 years of bondage.

"He sent a deliverer named Moses. I've told you, Son, many times about Moses, and how he brought us out of Egypt six hundred thousand strong. But because of disobedience we weren't allowed to move into the land of Canaan at this time. For Moses sent spies into the land and you remember, Son, that Caleb and I were among them. Oh, it was too much! You should have been there. There were grapes as big as apples, and grazing land for cattle and sheep, and there were ample streams of water. Sure, there were a few enemies- we could see them -- but God had said that the land was ours, so that wasn't our problem.

"So we came back to tell Moses 'Let's go,' and do you know what happened? Ten of our friends stood out against Caleb and me, and they said, 'No, it's a bad trip. There are giants in the land, and we're fearful. We'd better not go.' The people started to hear rumors about the situation, and they murmured, and they almost

stoned Moses and Caleb and me. And so Moses said, 'We're not going.' And God said, 'For every one of the forty days you were in the land searching it out, I'm going to place you one year in the wilderness to learn the lessons that you don't seem to know at this point. I'm going to take this opportunity to teach you truth.'

"And, Son, you know what happened after that. Moses died recently, and God put me in command." I can hear the son saying, "Hey, Dad, how did it feel to be the general?" And Joshua replies, "I was afraid. Son, I was scared. I didn't know what was going on. I was so accustomed to following Moses for forty years, and I never realized that I'd be chosen."

"Dad, what happened then?" "Well, there we were. I was told that the land was ours, and that Jericho was ours. We only had one problem -- a raging river named the Jordan. But I had learned my lesson. I knew that God moves in impossible ways.

And when God said, 'Take the priests and send them down by the river,' I simply obeyed, because I had experienced all this truth. And that's what I'm trying to pass on to you, Son- all this experience of truth.

"And so the priests went down to the river, and Son, it was too much! You know that Caleb and I were the only ones left who had come through the Red Sea, so we had a whole new generation with us who needed to learn a whole new experience about God. And so we marched through the river. My son, it was on dry land. Dry land! And then the priests came out and the river closed behind them. We burned our bridges, so to speak, and we were committed to the task before us, which was to conquer the land that God had already given us.

"And Son, God told me to put the stones in the middle of the river because he figured that you might not believe it. He said, 'Put stones here,' because he knew you would ask. And my son, I want to pass on to you that God is able to deal with impossible situations. I want to encourage you, and I want to strengthen your faith in Almighty God."

Verse 24 gives us the twofold purpose for all that has been going on in this chapter:

"... 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. "

First, that all the people of the earth would see that God Almighty, the God of Israel, is the living God. For at this time all the people of the earth were submersed in idol worship -- idols which were made by men's hands, which were dumb and deaf and could not answer prayer, have compassion, or do anything to build a man's character toward god-likeness. So God used this episode to strengthen their hearts that he was the God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (I love the way God kept appearing to his people and reviewing the truth about himself. You can watch this throughout the Old Testament. An angel appears somewhere. Someone says, "Excuse me, who are you?" He says, "I'm the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." "Ah yes, I know what that means. You are the God. There is no other God but you.") And so all the world is to see through this event that the hand of the Lord is mighty, overcomes the impossible, overcomes rivers and fortified cities.

This was the first fortified city these people had ever seen. They had been in the desert for forty years. How do you battle against a fortified city? They had little idea. The Lord said, "March around it seven times, and then shout, and the walls will come down." And they said, "Oh, sure. Listen, we heard rumors about how the Egyptians fought. We know how to take this city; we'll storm it, besseige it, burn it down." Joshua said, "Not on your life. You'll do what God says. He just took you through the Jordan; you'll trust him." "Oh, yeah." "Back to the stones. Let's go over it again_impossible situation, no bridge, never been there before. Did he take you through?" "Yes." "How's he going to do this?" "We don't know." "Just show up!" "Right." They needed to trust totally that God would take care of them. So what did he do? He gave them this experience so that they might know that his hand is mighty.

Then the second aspect of the purpose is that they may fear the Lord their God, that they may not fear their enemies nor the fortified cities nor idols nor philosophies nor the flesh, but that they would fear the living God, that they would respect him, see who he is, bless his name, have a thankful heart, understand that everything he is doing is for their benefit and welfare, so that they may end up praising him. Confidence! So

Joshua totally submitted himself to God, completely abandoned himself, and was blessed. And he had the stones to prove it, every time he grew weak in his life. Every time he needed to have some encouragement, every time he needed to know what was true, he could come back to Gilgal and sit down and review how God had worked in his life. And this was a cohesive force to spur him on, to give him hope that as God worked in the past, so he would work in the future.

And I thought, "What are the memorial stones of the Christian? What do we have in the church, in the New Testament writings, which are things which can be passed on to us? Two occurred to me immediately -- the Lord's Supper, looking forward to the cross, "Do this in remembrance of me," every time recalling to ourselves and to our children what Christ paid on our behalf; and then also, not to live in despair, but to review with our children the resurrection, the fact that the very power which raised Christ from the dead lives in our hearts right now, that God brings life out of death.

And then I started to think, "How can I make this even more practical for you, so that you can take something beyond these two teachings away from here for use in your daily life? What are the memorial stones in your life, things which have happened to you which you can build on? Let's build upon these two and surround our children with the tradition which comes from God's mind so that it will create such cohesive force in their lives that they will be blessed forever, and that God's name will be blessed forever.

I would like to share with you some ideas from my own experience, trying to keep them in proper perspective. I have some papers which I keep in frames, but in reality they are mere sawdust in my mouth. They are simply paper. But they do help to portray the framework of certain events which occurred in my life. It really doesn't matter what is written on them; the important issue is what happened during those times in my life. I keep these in my office in a special drawer which is low enough so that my curious sons can come and find them some day, and say, "Dad, what are these all about?" And I have waited years to be able to say, "My son, funny you should mention it..."

One of them is a high school diploma. Almost everybody has one, I'm sure. But this is when I almost lost my life. This is when a Christian teacher moved into my life and showed me what life was all about, and salvaged my life. This also is where I became president of the Freshman class twice where I had a straight D average for five years, and where I graduated simply because I was drafted during the Korean war. The faculty gave me a special party to wave goodbye! That was all right, because this was my wilderness, this was where I had so many failures.

The next frame situation was my military career. It was here that I found Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. It was here that I walked into the empty tomb in the garden in Jerusalem, the one which is thought to be the tomb from which Jesus Christ arose. I didn't realize in advance what was happening. I simply walked in, curious about the fact that he wasn't there, and suddenly it dawned on me, "He is not here, for he is risen!" And I said, "Lord, this is where I want to give you my life. This is where I want to die, and I want you to come alive and be my Lord." It was during this time that I met my wife, and where she came to know the Lord. It was then also that I got my vision for the ministry. This period is a fantastic memorial stone in my life.

I have another framework from when I went to college. It was here that I had to trust Christ for the absolutely impossible. Having never learned to study, I got into fantastic difficulty in trying to understand truth and use it. So I learned to study like crazy on my knees before the Lord! I remember in my senior year thinking that I just about had it made- except for physical science. Physical science was ready to wipe me out! I just couldn't understand it. My senior year, ready to be finished with this whole school, and suddenly stymied- at the Jordan River! I said, "Lord, as I look back, I know that you've taken care of me in the past; I know you can take care of me now." An impossible situation. I passed with a D-minus, but I passed! Dry ground, that's all that counts!

My last memorial stone is from when I went to graduate school. It was here that I learned again to cast myself totally upon God. I have no concept of phonics- I can't seem to hear certain sounds and I can't pronounce certain words. I did very well in this school -- except in Hebrew. There I was, my wife was teaching me to love the Jewish people, sharing all her love for them with me, and I couldn't get through Hebrew! But I remember my senior year again. It's the last exam, and I don't understand the language! "O Lord, for ten years

I've been wanting to come to this point where I can be used of you in a ministry, and of all the things that's going to wipe me out, it's Hebrew." I couldn't believe it! And suddenly the words came: "Without me, Ron, you can do nothing. Without me, you can do absolutely not one thing! Now, will you go back to Gilgal, and will you please go over the principles that I taught you through these stones?" I remember going to my car and saying to my heavenly Father, "Because of what you have done in the past, I shall trust you for present, and have hope in you for the future. Thank you for what you're going to do." I passed Hebrew!

I remember saying to the Lord, "If I ever pass Hebrew I will never doubt you again." That comes from youth! And now, so many times, this stone comes flashing back when I start doubting. "Hey, I thought you told me that if I helped you with Hebrew you would never doubt me again." And I have to remember this and say, "Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. You have blessed me so much, and I have such little faith. Help me in my unbelief."

And I challenge you to spend some time thinking through your memorial stones, and thinking about your children (and though many of you do not have physical children at this point, you do have spiritual children, people whom you are nurturing in the Word) and praying, "God, if they ask me 'What are the stones in my life? What are the impossible situations in my life where you worked?'" so that you will have it all laid out in advance, and you will be able to say to them, as Joshua said to his children, "My son, let me tell you about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Let me tell you the truth of the Living God, 'so that all the peoples of the world will know that his hand is mighty.' And when I am finished telling you these stories, you will fall to your knees and worship the Living God."

Our heavenly Father, thank you so much for your love and your mercy. Thank you, Lord, that we are "doomed to success"; we simply have to enter the land. Thank you so much that you have worked in the past which gives us courage for the present, and gives us hope for the future. Thank you for the tradition of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joshua. Thank you that you deliver us from ourselves and from the impossible situations. Thank you that you've told us that we can come to you in prayer and cast our most ridiculous situations at your feet, that you will answer these prayers according to your will, that you will release us from anxiety and give us peace which passes all understanding, and that you will guard our hearts and minds in Christ. Thank you so much that you are the God of History, and yet the God who cares for us. Lord, so many of us are in impossible situations right now. And we pray that these words which come from your word may be used to encourage, that those who are facing these situations will simply stop and review how you have worked in their lives in the past, and that they will remember that the very same God is still alive and ready to work at this moment, if we will but trust you, for you are that God. Thank you, heavenly Father, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Catalog No. 3 101
Joshua 4
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April 1, 1973

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