Stones of Remembrance

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[0:00] Hey, welcome everybody. What a great morning, right? So good to be with you here. So we've actually just wrapped up a series from the book of Philippians. And now we're kind of in this stretch right here before we get to Easter.

And so we're going to be preparing for that. And then after that, we're actually going to do a series from the book of Joel. So that's way over there in that portion of your Bible. Didn't have any notes in it. So we'll flip over that and do that for a little while.
But today is kind of a special day because we're looking forward to next week, which is kind of the celebration, sort of officially official launch of City Grace when all the signs change and we kind of start this new season as a church.
Yeah, absolutely. It's good times. But anytime you're getting ready to move into like a new season or a new adventure, I do think it is appropriate to take kind of like one second and just pause and stop and remember.
And by remember, I don't necessarily mean reminisce, though that can be a good thing too, right? Like one of life's best blessings is just to sit around with good friends and tell stories of the good old days and the good times.
[1:08] And the truth is, whatever this church becomes next, what we were and have been was a gift from God too. And so it's good to think on that.

But the kind of remembering I really want to do today is the kind where we pause and we just remember that God has been faithful. And I think that's important because remembrance is one of the most powerful tools for strengthening our faith.
It's something God wants us to take a moment to do. But like all good practices, it does have challenges. Part of the challenge is, I think our biology just honestly kind of works against us.
I mean, whether it's because we're living with a flawed body in a fallen world or something else, humans just really aren't that great at remembering. I mean, study after study has kind of demonstrated how unreliable people's memories are, even when you're fully certain of something, right?
And of course, there's periods of your life it's hard to remember anything. One of the things, so the only memory I have from being three years old is from going to Disney World when I was three years old.
[2:18] And you might think of all the things you would think I remember about that, but I remember precisely two things from that trip. One was I have this image of me sitting on the monorail and looking out the window.

So that's memory number one. And memory number two is I remember seeing like the big thing over at Epcot and saying I want to go there and being told you won't like it. And literally that's it. Like I don't remember Mickey any, ask my parents, I'm sure there's more details. But like that's all I remember about that. Our bodies make it hard to remember.
But I also think we kind of have a problem with remembering because we sort of live in a what have you done for me lately kind of culture too. I remember years ago watching this special where Phil Jackson was talking about after the Bulls had won their first championship.
And the next year, this is what he said to them. He said, You are only a success at the moment you do a successful thing. You have to do it again.
[3:22] Now you could probably interrogate the overall wisdom of that as like a life statement, right? Whether it's good for driving you towards success or whether that's sort of an insecurity that needs to be fought. But whatever you think, I do think it encompasses the reality of how we think about success.

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I mean like if you think about sports teams, whatever you think, can you remember who won the championship two years ago? Like what about five years ago? I mean if you didn't do it yesterday, does it even matter?
And that ethic kind of runs through as culture kind of makes it easy for us to question remembering and whether it matters. But the Bible tells us that remembering is important and in particular remembering who God is and what He's done is a key to moving into whatever you're called to next.
So today we're going to be looking at just a quick few examples in Scripture of where God asks His people to do that. The first one's going to be in Joshua chapter 1. It'll be on the screen behind me. In Joshua chapter 1 verse 1, big moment in the life of Israel. It says this, After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, Moses, my servant, is dead.
[4:38] Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I'm giving them to the people of Israel. Every place the sole of your foot will tread as I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses.

From the wilderness and this Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates and the land of the Hittites, towards the great sea, towards the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life, because just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.
This is God's Word to us. This passage records a momentous occasion in the life of this nation. And it starts with a pretty stark phrase, Moses is dead.
It is hard for us to understand and overstate how big that would have been in the life of this people, the role that Moses had. I mean, who they were.
Like the question would have been, who are we and what will we do? Like he's the big Mo, right? Like what are we going to do? And I think it's no coincidence that God's first instruction to Joshua tells him that just as I was with Moses, I'm going to be with you as well.
[5:55] And that's because remembrance finds strength in God's faithfulness to those who came before us. God saying that to Joshua is effectively him saying, you are not the people of Moses.

You are the people of God. And I think one of the most important exercises in our faith is to read the stories of the saints who have come before us because it's really easy to fall into the trap wherever you are, wherever you're born into, to think these are unprecedented times.
No one in history, nobody in the church, has ever had to face what I do. And in some sense that's true because no one moment is exactly like any one other moment.
But in another sense, there's really nothing new under the sun. Faithful men and women of ages past testify to us that the followers of Jesus have faced hardship before.
The followers of Jesus have faced persecution. They've faced diseases and plagues. They've faced compromise within their own ranks.
[7:07] They've faced spiritual dryness in a society that cares nothing about God. They've faced the temptation to despair. And they have faced the threat of death.

And across the ages, it's literally like they whisper to you, God was faithful. Hebrews 11 is basically this anthem of the faith of God's people and His deliverance.
If you haven't read it before, check it out. It's really just one long testimony of the faithfulness of God to His people over the ages. And at the beginning of Hebrews 12, after it gives that anthem, it says this to us, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight in the sin that clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race before us.
God was faithful to the people of the past. And that means He will be faithful to us as His people now. But that isn't the only lesson that Joshua learns and that that book has to teach us.
You see, Joshua also learns during this journey into the promised land that it's important to place stones of remembrance in your life. So if you flash forward to Joshua chapter 3, and Israel's finally taking this big, long-awaited step of crossing the Jordan, and God does this miracle that's actually much like the miracle He does for Moses when He parts the Red Sea.
[8:43] He kind of dries up the river so the entire nation of Israel can pass over it. And then thinking about that in Joshua chapter 4, it says this, When all of the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe and man, and command them, saying, Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priest's feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them

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down in the place where you lodged tonight.

And so then Joshua called twelve men from the people of Israel whom Him appointed, one man from each tribe, and Joshua said to them, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, and this will be a sign among you.
When your children ask in a time to come, What do these stones mean to you? Then you will tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.
When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. Because we face challenges to being a people that remembers, it's important that we take a moment to memorialize important events because they fade so quickly.
You know, years ago when Jen and I were visiting the UK, one of the things that actually struck us unexpectedly there while we were there is kind of the red poppies that they wear on Remembrance Day there.
[10:18] And it's also really interesting that you could tell in a very real way the First World War had left a scar on the cultural memory of the British in a way it just doesn't resonate the same with us.

For us, that's more of the Second World War. And certainly there were memorials to that too, but it was obvious that World War I was something for them, right? And that's why all around the world we set up monuments and stones and museums to remember.
Sometimes the good things, sometimes the terrible things. But we need to remember. And it's important that we have those as kind of stones because, again, memory again fails us.
All of us, I think depending on when you grow up, you know you have those never forget where I was kind of memories, right? that later don't resonate at all with the next generation, right?
Like I firmly remember sitting in a class as a young kid and watching the Challenger explode. And most kids today would have no idea what that was.
[11:22] But that was something I'll never forget. Like it resonated and everybody who's in that classroom to this day remembers it. I mean, as crazy as it sounds, the never forget of 9-11 is slowly fading into history.

It's almost a quarter century ago since that happened. And that's why we build monuments to those things. Stones of remembrance remind us things we don't want to forget.
And it's no different with the things of God. You know, one of the disciplines or practices of the faith I've found helpful over the years is to kind of keep a journal of those stones of remembrance in my life.
And I know like maybe you're not a big writer or a big journaler. I'm not that either. But I'd at least invite you to consider it might be worth writing down some of the big moments in your life with God because they're so easy to forget.
And I'm talking about things like a place where God came through and you didn't think He was going to come through. Maybe you were part of something miraculous that you couldn't explain.
[12:31] Maybe God told you something about who you are that was important to set the course of your life that's important to remember. Maybe God gave you a direction for life like you were struggling to figure out where to go and then God told you something about where you were going.

And the thing is it doesn't have to be big like sometimes that stone of remembrance for a person or for a body of believers is something the rest of the world might miss.
One of the stones I have in my journal is a memory I have from being a kid when I put a $1 coin in the offering plate. And I know if you're here and you're under 20 you're probably like what's a coin? They were like these they were these metal things in the late 1900s we used to barter for goods with them let's like Google it but but as a kid I had a bit of a hobby of collecting interesting coins and I liked the really big ones right?
And I had finally gotten my hands on one of those really big like you know the Eisenhower ones like the $1 coins right? And it might seem really silly but I was excited about having it like I would take it out and I would look at it and you know I don't know if I ever uttered the phrase my precious but it was probably getting to that it was probably getting to that level at some point right?
[13:48] Like I just really enjoyed that coin. And I remember clear as day I had brought it with me I don't even remember why I had brought it with me to church one night church at night that's another

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one remember that?

Like I had brought it with me to church and during the offering I remember almost as if he said it audibly God saying Elliot you need to give that to me.
And again you might think it's silly how much a young kid struggled as the offering plate got closer and closer but just somehow knowing in that moment if I was going to be a follower of Jesus I was going to have to put that coin in the plate and so I did.
And while that might seem like a small thing as I've looked back over my life over and over God has reminded me of that and I think part of that what he was trying to tell me is like that was an important part of starting the process of breaking the spell of money and things of your life.
A simple testimony that this doesn't belong to you it belongs to God. And there's certainly more to learn but it was an important step to remember.
[15:02] We have stones like that as a church as this body as well like when we were trying to launch out this church into Havelock the truth was we really had no place to meet.

Like whatever we were doing like we couldn't find a place to meet and we sort of just kind of threw out this Hail Mary for lack of a better term in an email and a church answered. And if you know a Cherry Point Baptist answered that prayer and if you know anything about how churches feel sometimes about like sharing their stuff and inconveniencing their own thing that is a minor miracle but they did it.
And we wouldn't exist if that body of believers hadn't said it's worth our inconvenience. God came through. Remembering is important.
But not just for looking back. Remembering is important for looking ahead as well because remembrance helps us have the courage to take the next step. After another deliverance of God's people later in the Bible the prophet Samuel does something similar to what you saw in Joshua.
And in 1 Samuel 7 12 it tells us he does this it says then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shenn and he called its name Ebenezer for he said till now the Lord has helped us.
[16:34] Thus far the Lord has helped us. You know in the famous hymn come thou found of every blessing that the English pastor Robert Robinson wrote there's a line about that right.

It says here I raise my Ebenezer hither by thy help I'm come and I hope by thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home. Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God he to rescue me from danger interposed his precious blood.
You know it's interesting because when we sing that hymn in modern church context sometimes worship leaders have found over the years you almost it's almost helpful to take a moment and describe what that meant from the book of Samuel because obviously the word Ebenezer is not common to us so you might just think we're talking about Scrooge if we don't like clarify it.
But what's easy to miss in this hymn is the song itself is Robert Robinson's Ebenezer. It was for him a declaration a stone of remembrance that Jesus sought me when I was far away and he brought me home.
I've come this far by his help and I will trust in that same help to get me safely home. City Grace Church this far has God helped us.
[18:08] When we needed a home in Havelock and we didn't have it he helped us. And then when we moved to the convention center in Havelock and we had to be a full set up and tear down like make walls kind of church every week he helped us.

And then when COVID wiped all of that out in two weeks he helped us find a place again. When we had to leave Havelock and that was hard because we loved Havelock and we still do.
But we knew he was calling us to come here when we moved to Newbern. We embraced it and he helped us. And now we've changed the name.
We'll change the signs. We'll do things that we probably hadn't dreamed of before but God will still be with us. And you know the great thing about that is we don't have to worry about it because unlike us God does not have a problem remembering.
In Isaiah 49 God says this to his people but Zion has said the Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me.
[19:25] And God's response to that is can a woman forget the nursing child that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb. Even these may forget yet I will not forget you.

God says it is more likely like if you've ever watched a mother with the connection and tenderness that she has with her child and when she is nursing her child.

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And God says it is more likely that she would forget the child at her bosom than I could forget you. Because behold I have engraved you on the palm of my hands.
When Isaiah wrote that and he says more in that chapter there's a lot of ideas there about the idea of engraving on a wall. What we know now though is that that wasn't the only engraving God was doing.
When Jesus is resurrected it's kind of this interesting thing right? Like we look forward to the day when like Jesus as this baptism testified we will be raised anew like we'll have a new body.
[20:37] And Jesus has a new body. He has been made whole but it is interesting that the father chooses to not heal the scars in his hands and his feet and his side.

His new body wears those as an engraving, a testimony for the rest of time that I cannot forget you and I will never forget you.
God loves us. He's been with us this far. It has not been given to me to know what the fate of this church will be in years to come.
It might be filled with challenges that we never expected. It might be filled with blessings and big things that we could have never imagined but I do know that the God of the ages will never forget us.
And if and he will be faithful to us. And he will send his spirit amongst us. We'll invite him in. The band comes up.
[21:41] If you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus let me just say it's a blessing to have you here. I don't know what you've brought in with you but it's okay.

And if you're wanting to draw closer to God like if you know you've messed up your life in a way that you can't fix and you're looking for a new place to start we'd love to be a part of that.
We're simply a people who tries to remember how God has been faithful to us and then we try to extend that to others. If you want to know about that we'd love to tell you.
If you're here and you are a follower of Jesus particularly if you're part of this church I would just say remember church. Remember what God's done in your life.
He's been faithful to you. Remember what God has done for our church. I know God's going to be with us. Day by day. And that's our prayer.
[22:41] Father we come and give to you this moment. God I pray over the launch of this particular expression of your global body of Christ.

City Grace Church I pray that as you've been with us this far you will go with us forward. I pray God you will be faithful in ways that are surprising and unexpected to us.
Though they shouldn't be. God as we do this moment of communion for those who call themselves by your name I pray that you will as we take the elements in our souls just remind us Jesus that you can't forget us.
like we're literally on your hands and feet and your side. Throughout all eternity that engraving will testify to all of creation to all of heaven and earth that we are loved by you.
God give us a vision of that today. Holy Spirit have your way in this moment we ask in Jesus name. God.
[23:55]

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