

OLD TESTAMENT FIGURES

Joshua

Memorial stones, a cliffhanger ending, and the one leader who never needed replacing

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, January 2, 2022
PASSAGES	Joshua 1-24; Joshua 3:7; Joshua 4:6-7; Joshua 5:13-14; Joshua 24:14-15; Joshua 24:26-27; Numbers 14:20-24; Matthew 1:1; Romans 8:37; Hebrews 7:25
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:02:23 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The book of Joshua is built out of memorial stones, and not one of them was set up to prove that God was on Israel's side. They were set up to teach Israel who God is. The book then ends on a cliffhanger — will this generation obey? — and Israel never answers it. Jesus does, by becoming our obedience on our behalf.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Remembering is not nostalgia and it is not decoration. It instructs us in who God is and what he is like, which is why Joshua is full of stone piles.
- ◆ The angel with the drawn sword answers Joshua's "are you for us or for our enemies?" with a flat "No." God is not on team Israel; Israel has to get on team God.
- ◆ Israel's circumstances were never what decided their faithfulness. They found ways to disobey as slaves in Egypt and they found ways to disobey behind fortified walls in a land of abundance.
- ◆ Not every memorial in the book is an encouragement. Achan's heap and Ai's ruins are memorials too — the same stones can mark a warning.
- ◆ A church that has been blessed can misread the blessing. Trees are green because they are planted by the river, not because they are great trees, and they should not walk off into the desert on the strength of their own history.

- ◆ Judges is not a sine wave returning to the same heights. It descends. The honest lesson of Israel's history is that a people cannot keep faith generation to generation.
- ◆ Joshua foreshadows Jesus as a leader who asks faithfulness and brings blessing, and as a conqueror whose people become conquerors under him.
- ◆ Jesus does not end his leadership with a farewell speech begging the next generation to obey. He does not die, he does not age out, and he has already supplied the obedience the cliffhanger was asking for.

► 1:05:09

Matt opened with church business that turned out to be the sermon's front door. He wanted to recap the year — and then noticed that the recap itself was the theme of the book he was about to walk through. "A big theme of the book of Joshua," he said, is "not just the conquering but the remembering."

1. A thankfulness project — and why remembering has a purpose

► 1:05:45

He floated the idea of a thankfulness-to-God project at Hope: write down what God has done, in our own lives and in the life of this body, on pieces of cloth and quilt them together, or hang them on a banner across the room. He was candid that he had not decided what it should look like, and equally candid about what would make it worthless. "The point is not to decorate," he said. "The point is to remember."

And remembering is not sentiment. "Remembering has a purpose. It's a way of instructing us." What it instructs us in is the character of God — which, he said, is exactly the use Joshua puts it to.

2. Joshua, painted as a new Moses

► 1:06:37

The book goes out of its way to draw Joshua in Moses' outline. Like Moses he calls Israel to obey. Like Moses he sends spies ahead. Like Moses he speaks with God in a particular way, and leads in government, military and religious matters at once. Like Moses he is told to take off his sandals on holy ground. Like Moses he closes his life with a covenant-renewal speech. And God says so out loud:

“Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.”

JOSHUA 3:7 ↗

► 1:07:54

Matt filled in the back story in a few strokes. Spies had gone into Canaan under Moses and come back frightened of the inhabitants' stature ([Numbers 13:25–33](#)). Caleb and Joshua gave a positive estimate — not of Israel, but of what God would be willing to do. That generation was sentenced to die in the wilderness, with those two preserved ([Numbers 14:20–24](#)). God had offered once to start over and make a greater nation out of Moses alone, and Moses interceded by reciting God's own words about himself back to him ([Exodus 32:9–14](#)).

3. The question the whole book is asking

► 1:08:58

By the opening of Joshua, that generation and Moses are dead. Everyone left except Caleb and Joshua has known nothing but wilderness. The question hanging over every chapter is simple: will they obey this time? Obedience meant blessing and inheritance; disobedience meant the covenant curses they had rehearsed, and dying out of the land quickly.

Matt pushed back on the assumption that wilderness upbringing was a handicap. Israel had been perfectly capable of fear and unbelief while enslaved in Egypt, and perfectly capable of disobedience later behind fortified walls in a land of abundance. Circumstance was not what decided it. What this generation did have was an enormous inventory of miracles — done among their fathers and among themselves. The captains' pledge sounds confident enough: wherever you send us we will go ([Joshua 1:16–17](#)).

4. The crossing, and the first pile of stones

► 1:10:47

The priests carry the ark into the Jordan, the water stands up in a heap upstream, and the nation walks across on dry ground. “That is very familiar,” Matt said — the point being that God “hasn't died or given up. He is still with them.”

► 1:11:26

Mid-crossing, Joshua sends twelve men to haul stones out of the riverbed and stack them on the far bank. The reason is spelled out in the text, and it is a reason about children:

“When your children ask in times to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord... So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.”

JOSHUA 4:6–7 ↗

5. “Are you for us, or for our enemies?”

► 1:12:08

Then, outside Jericho, Joshua meets a figure with a drawn sword and asks the obvious question. The answer is one word, and it is not one of the two options offered.

“And Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you for us, or for our adversaries?’ And he said, ‘No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.’”

JOSHUA 5:13–14 ↗

This exchange was the hinge of the message. “God is not on team Israel,” Matt said. “What needs to happen is that Israel needs to be on team God.” Israel is not better than Canaan, so that God is merely handing out what each side deserves. Israel is playing a role. Obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings the same punishment the Canaanites are receiving.

6. Memorial after memorial

► 1:12:44

From there Matt counted the markers as they came, and the tally is the argument. Jericho falls after six silent circuits and a seventh day of shouting, and Jericho itself is left as a memorial, never to be rebuilt (Joshua 6:15–20). Then Ai routs them, because Achan had taken devoted goods from Jericho; he is put to death and a heap of stones is raised over him (Joshua 7:25–26). Ai falls on the second attempt, and stones go up over its dead king (Joshua 8:28–29).

► 1:15:18

Five Amorite kings besiege Gibeon — the city that had just tricked Israel into a peace treaty — and Gibeon, Israel’s brand-new ally by deception, sends up a cry for help. Israel fights, and Joshua prays for

the sun to stand still (Joshua 10:12–14). The kings hide in a cave; Joshua has stones rolled across the mouth of it and tells his men to keep chasing. After the kings are executed, five stones go up — one per king (Joshua 10:16–27). Later the eastern tribes build an altar so large the other tribes muster for war over it, and have to be told it is not for sacrifice at all. It is a witness that they serve the same God and share the same inheritance (Joshua 22:26–27).

7. “Be careful to love the Lord”

► 1:16:56

Old now, Joshua summons everyone and tells them to be very careful to love the Lord (Joshua 23:11). Matt flagged the oddness of that, and judged the concern well placed: after all those memorials, all that witness, all that history and heritage, Joshua is still worried. He recounts everything God has done back to Abraham — the way Stephen later will in Acts — and then says something stranger still: put away the foreign gods from among you. Would there still be any?

“Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord... But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

JOSHUA 24:14–15 ↗

► 1:18:12

The covenant is renewed at Shechem, and one more stone is set up under the terebinth as a witness (Joshua 24:26–27). Then the book simply stops, with the choice left standing and nobody’s answer recorded. Matt tied the cliffhanger back to the man with the sword. If God prospered Israel no matter what, because he was on their team, the message broadcast to the nations would be incoherent — be an Israelite and things go well for you, and otherwise, tough. The message was supposed to be that Israel’s God is the real God, worth serving and loving, and that he is beckoning the nations too.

8. The name Joshua, and the conqueror behind it

► 1:19:30

Joshua in Hebrew is Jesus in Greek. Matt was careful not to overdo the type, though. Some will say Joshua is greater than Moses because Moses only brought the law while Joshua brought them into the land, and he does not buy it. “Moses didn’t really give anything from himself,” he said. “He only gave what God told him to give.” Besides, Moses represented God’s deliverance out of slavery, and Matt was

not sure how anyone could say the law did that. Both men, he said, represent God shepherding his people even in their weakness.

► 1:20:44

Where the foreshadowing does hold is in two places. Joshua was the leader who asked faithfulness of them and brought blessing when they gave it. And Joshua was a conqueror — Jesus being the destroyer of pagan gods and the conqueror of sin, “that but more.” The second half of that is the part worth sitting with: because the Israelites followed under Joshua’s leadership, in their obedience to his words and his obedience to God’s, they became conquerors too. Which foreshadows people who are more than conquerors in and through someone else’s work, not their own. And like the end of Joshua, the invitation is left open-ended: “The way is open, the battle is his and won. Now, whom will you serve?”

9. God is not on team Hope

► 1:21:20

Here the thankfulness project came back, with its guardrail attached. Memorial after memorial after memorial in Joshua, Matt said, and not one of them was a witness to how great Israel was. The stones were never a way of saying “look how team Israel God is.” So if Hope Chapel sets out to remember what God has done here, “it would be wrong for us to take that and say, look how much God is on team Hope.” In Joshua the stones worked as warnings and encouragements at once: stay faithful to Yahweh, in whose hands are rich blessings and favor; he is your victory.

► 1:22:33

He reached for a warning he has given this church several times — the image of people as trees planted by the river. Well-watered, strong, full of sap. Such trees “should not delude themselves and walk into the desert thinking, well, I have always had water and I always will.” They only had water because they were by the river. A church looking back on how God has blessed it should never think “well, that’s just because we are great, and we could deviate or do whatever we wish and we will always have this kind of blessing.”

► 1:23:09

What the blessing is for, he said, is evidence of someone else. In the way God has blessed and preserved this body, “it’s a lesson, it’s a witness, it’s a testimony to who he is and what he’s like.” All the wonderful things God has done here do not mean God is on team Hope. What they show is that God is a provider, a Father who cares deeply for his children and is not running out of resources. The right response to a witness like that is not pride but allegiance: “We are on team God. He is our greatest loyalty, not this church. His message is more important than our own internal matters.”

► 1:23:56

Which puts this church under the same assignment the Israelites had. They were called to faith and obedience, “to remember and to faithfully obey” — and so, Matt said, “we also should remember who God is and faithfully obey him, to walk in obedience.” The parallel is the whole point of the project: same stones, same instruction, same choice standing open.

10. The leader the cliffhanger was waiting for

► 1:24:38

There is one more layer, because Joshua’s unanswered question runs straight into Judges. Matt declined to retell those stories — Hope did a series on the judges last year, too soon to repeat, and it was a dark one — but he named the shape of them. Israel turns out to be no better than the surrounding nations at faithful obedience: great difficulty, renewals, then betrayals, and it is tragic (Judges 2:16–19). And the pattern is not a sine wave up and down and back to the same heights. “It’s more like a toilet flush,” he said — more and more into difficulty, more and more into treachery, more and more into disobedience, and just being totally lost and confused.

► 1:25:52

He widened it deliberately to include us — “I say we now because it’s sort of a large looming lesson.” What you see in Israel’s history, before Moses and Joshua and after, is that “we as a people have great difficulty with faithfulness,” great difficulty walking in consistent, constant obedience generation to generation. What that leaves behind is a pain and a desire: if only there were another renewal, another leader like Moses who led the people in signs and wonders, or like Joshua who led them in signs and wonders, another judge raised up like the deliverers, some strong leadership to guide people who were like sheep without a shepherd. Then Samuel anoints a king — “we’ll get there,” Matt said, flagging where the teaching goes next — and the kings are really good when they are good and really bad when they are bad. The longing for strong, genuinely godly leadership only sharpens.

► 1:27:05

And the cliffhanger at the end of the Old Testament, Matt said, leads straight into the genealogy of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham — the strong leader who never dies, does not get old, and does not finish his life with a speech saying “I’m dying now, please obey, remember and obey.” “He, unlike the other strong leaders, was perfect in his leadership.” He never dies, and ultimately he does what none of these other leaders was ever able to do. Then the thing Matt called inexplicable, “actually kind of outrageous as well”: Jesus manages to be, on our behalf, our obedience to the Father, in ways we never could have managed under a Moses or a Joshua. “By identifying with us so much, by becoming one of us, dying and obeying on our behalf, he became our holiness and our obedience.” And he always intercedes for us.

So the year ahead, and the remembering project with it, got a single assignment. Our greatest desire would be to know God more — to know and remember who he is; to admit that walking in faith is difficult for us and offer ourselves up anyway; and, as Evan had said at the table where the church proclaims his death, to proclaim that he became our obedience on our behalf. “So let us remember and obey.”

► 1:27:44

Then he prayed it, and the prayer is where the project got its actual shape — three registers of remembering, in order: “help us to remember everything you’ve done in our own lives, everything you’ve done for us as a church, and everything you’ve done in redemptive history.” Fill our hearts with faith on these things, he asked, and help us to walk in obedience after you. The last words to the room were a sending: go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Joshua 3:7](#)
- [Numbers 13:25–33](#)
- [Numbers 14:20–24](#)
- [Exodus 32:9–14](#)
- [Joshua 1:16–17](#)
- [Joshua 4:6–7](#)
- [Joshua 5:13–14](#)
- [Joshua 6:15–20](#)
- [Joshua 7:25–26](#)
- [Joshua 8:28–29](#)
- [Joshua 10:12–14](#)
- [Joshua 10:16–27](#)
- [Joshua 22:26–27](#)
- [Joshua 23:11](#)
- [Joshua 24:14–15](#)
- [Joshua 24:26–27](#)
- [Romans 8:37](#)
- [Psalm 1:3](#)
- [Judges 2:16–19](#)
- [Matthew 9:36](#)
- [1 Samuel 10:1](#)
- [Matthew 1:1](#)
- [Hebrews 7:25](#)
- [1 Corinthians 11:26](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What has God actually done in your life this past year that you would put on a piece of cloth and hang on the wall? What does it instruct you about who he is?
2. The angel told Joshua “no” — God was not on team Israel. Where have you quietly assumed God was on your team rather than asking whether you are on his?
3. Not every memorial in Joshua was an encouragement; some marked disobedience. Is there a pile of stones in your own history that you would rather not walk past, and what is it meant to teach you?
4. Matt warned against the well-watered tree that walks off into the desert assuming it will always have water. Where are you living off past blessing instead of present nearness to the river?
5. Joshua ends with the question unanswered and the choice standing. What does remembering and faithfully obeying look like for you in the week ahead — one concrete thing?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHnJlfvA5dw&t=3743s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.