

The God Who is With Us

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[0 : 0 0] So if you're a visitor with us this evening or if you've been away for a while, we've recently, St. Columba's begun a new series in our evening services. We're looking through the book of Joshua together.

So if you have a Bible and you want to follow along, you might find it helpful to have it open at Joshua chapter 3 and chapter 4. We're taking on two chapters this evening. So I hope you're awake and alert and we'll dig into Joshua together.

So we're looking together through the book of Joshua at the God who makes and keeps his promises. A few weeks ago we began in chapter 1, looking at God's great promise of a new home for his people.

Last time, a few weeks ago, Derek looked at Rahab in chapter 2, where we see the incredible way that God's grace and mercy extend to the outsider.

And this evening we're moving into chapters 3 and 4, which we read earlier about God's people crossing over the River Jordan. Now we said at the beginning of the series a few weeks ago that this first and foremost is a book about God.

[1 : 0 9] It's a book about God's promises. God is very much the main character in Joshua. Joshua is not just dry history and boring, irrelevant details about the past.

Every page, every word tells us more about who God is as our living God and Savior, the one who has made human beings and has sought to receive and redeem and to establish a relationship with a people.

And in any relationship, one of the most damaging things is the problem of forgetfulness. I'm sure many of you can relate to having forgotten a birthday or an anniversary of someone close to you.

Maybe you've been on the other end of that, or maybe you can relate to having had plans you've made with a friend forgotten about. Being forgotten can be incredibly damaging and hurtful.

But as human beings, in many ways we are forgetful people. And if that's true in our human relationships with one another, how much more true is that in our relationship with God?

[2 : 1 1] So as we look together this evening at this part of Joshua, there are just two key things I want to emphasize. Two points this evening that we can learn about God's character that helps us tackle spiritual forgetfulness in our lives as Christians.

So the first thing I want us to think about this evening is that God wants you to know who he is. And this is a key idea throughout the Bible. God acts, God does stuff in order that people will know who he is.

Our God, the God of the Bible, is a relational God who makes himself known. He reveals himself. And in the passages that we're looking at in Joshua 3 and 4, we see the word no pop up time and time again in order that you may know.

The section we're looking at is kind of sandwiched or bookmarked with this idea of knowing. It begins first in chapter 3 and verse 10 where it says, in order that Israel might know.

And it ends at the end of chapter 4 in verse 24 in order that all peoples might know. So before we dig into the text itself, I think it's helpful for us to think briefly about what the Bible means by knowledge.

[3 : 19] What does it mean to know? Well, the Hebrew word that's used for knowing the verb, it conveys far more than merely cognitive, intellectual understanding or awareness of something.

J.I. Packer, an Anglican theologian, has written a book called Knowing God. And if I had a top five book list, I think that every Christian should read, Knowing God would definitely be in that.

Knowing God is a wonderful book. But he makes the point that there's a huge difference between knowing about God and actually knowing God. And that's particularly true, I think, in the way the word's used in the Old Testament.

You see, to know someone or to know something in the Old Testament usually involved a sense of the knower being involved, either by an action or a relationship or a response. There's an Old Testament scholar called Dale Ralph Davis, and he's written a number of really helpful commentaries on the Old Testament.

And on the book in Joshua, he says this, To know the Lord means to trust in his promises. To know the Lord is to recognize who he is and what he has done. To know the Lord is to give him the praise and the glory as the one true living God.

[4 : 30] So what he's saying is that biblical knowing involves much more than just intellectual awareness or head knowledge. And there's echoes for us there, I think, in the book of Exodus. One of the key themes in the book of Exodus is that the people would know the Lord as the one true living God, and that their lives would reflect that knowledge.

And so as we come to Joshua 3 and 4, there are two key things I think God wants his people to know here about himself. The first thing we see in chapter 3 and verse 9, God wants you to know that he is with you.

Joshua said to the people of Israel, come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God. And Joshua said, Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, and all the otherites.

Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. In other words, God wants people to know that he is a present God. He is a God who is near, a God who is with his people.

I think many people today in our world have a picture of God who if he exists is in some way floating around somewhere distant and far away, detached and uninvolved in our world and in our lives.

[5 : 53] But this is the point of the ark of the covenant. It pops up right the way through the Old Testament and it's repeatedly referred to in the passage you and read for us. The ark of the covenant is a clear picture of God's presence. It points us to God's closeness to his people.

You see, when the people were in the camp in the wilderness, the ark was placed at the heart of the tabernacle. And at the center of the tabernacle was what was called the Holy of Holies. And it was there that you found the ark of the covenant.

It's a picture of where God dwells in the midst of his people. And we see that from the very beginning of Joshua. We thought about this a few weeks ago, that God wants people to know that he is near, he is present, he is with us.

He promises Joshua in chapter one, just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will never leave you, nor will I forsake you. And now as the people are about to cross the river Jordan into the land and as they're about to face all of these battles and struggles, God wants to remind his people first and foremost that he is with them.

God is acting on his people's behalf in their midst. He is close and nearby. And so there's a sense in which these are words spoken to God's people in a particular time for a particular reason in redemptive history.

[7 : 16] But at the same time, God speaks these words through the gospel to us. Through the gospel, God is near to us in Jesus Christ. It's the ultimate climax of this principle, the Emmanuel, Jesus, the one who dwells in us through his spirit.

And what that means is that for us today, there's not a single battle or struggle or difficulty that we face without that God next to us. There's not a single trial or burden we have to shoulder without God's close presence and his loving, tender care.

So God wants people to know that he is a present God. Secondly, God wants you to know his power. And we see this when we flip to the end of chapter 4 and verse 23.

It says there, for the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over. So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.

I think people also have a picture of a God who, if he exists, is kind of impotent, a God who is somehow ineffective, irrelevant, has no significance on the world in which we live.

[8 : 35] And I think even as Christians sometimes we have a tendency to dumb God down. We sometimes put limits on what we think God can do. But the God of the Bible wants you to know that he is a powerful God. God is a powerful God.

And this really, I think, is what this story drives home to us, the crossing of the river Jordan. The people of God have come to the edge of the land. They're almost there. They're almost into the home that's been promised to them.

But they come to this last obstacle, this river Jordan that we're told is in full flood. And it's maybe hard for us to picture what the other sides have to do. When I was younger I used to feel like an absolute champion if I stuck my belly boots on my water foot trousers and crossed the stream that was near our house.

But this is a monstrous torrent. This is physically impossible without God. A bit of context, the Jordan Valley itself is between 3 and 14 miles wide as it runs from north to south, from Galilee, I think, to the Dead Sea.

And there's a flood plain in that valley which runs a mile wide. And covering that plain is dense undergrowth. And apparently the average drop in the level of that river is 40 feet in every mile.

[9 : 49] So this river would be an absolute beast. Delorav Davis says this means that the river Israel faced was no placid stream, but a raging torrent, probably a mile wide, covering a mass of tangled bush and jungle growth.

In other words, this river that Israel have to cross is insane. It's the worst possible time they could have crossed it. So from a human perspective they're facing an impossible task. And this underlines for us, I think, the point that God is leading his people.

We're told that they crossed on dry ground. See, from the opening of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1, right the way through, there's an emphasis on God as the absolute maker, creator, sustainer of all things.

He is sovereign over this physical universe. Psalm 24 verse 1 sums this up really well. It says, It says, So the point is God's power over creation and the world in which we live shows human beings who he is.

And Paul picks up on this in the New Testament in the book of Acts in 17 when he's in Athens. It says there in verse 22, I think. Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus.

[11 : 06] He says, For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God.

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. That the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.

Since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything else. And the really incredible thing about the gospel is that we can know this God.

We can know the God who made the amazing world in which we live. We can have intimate knowledge and a personal relationship with such a powerful and holy and righteous God while we are so sinful and flawed and tiny and insignificant people.

God wants people to know who he is. He wants us to know that he is present and that he is powerful. And the really amazing thing is that if you're a Christian here this evening, is that powerful God knows you.

[12 : 16] He knows you this evening. That is an incredible truth of the gospel. The Lord of heaven and earth, the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything knows you and loves you as an individual.

And we experience his presence and his power and his nearness through faith in Jesus Christ. The second main point this evening is that God not only wants us to know, he wants us to remember.

God wants people to remember what he has done. And this is really what chapter four is all about. The people have crossed over the Jordan. They've experienced God's amazing power over nature.

And the first thing they're told to do is to put up twelve stones. It seems like a bit of a bizarre situation. So what does it mean? What's the point here? Let's look at chapter four from verse four.

Joshua calls twelve men from the people of Israel whom he had appointed a man from each tribe. And he says to them, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan. And take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel.

[13 : 22] This will be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come what do these stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters were cut off.

So these stones shall be to the people of Israel and memorial forevermore. And this is another key biblical theme. God's people need to remember what God has done.

Because God knows that we are forgetful. God knows that his people are incredibly forgetful. One of the main problems we see the people of Israel come across throughout the Old Testament is not really threats from external sources from aggressive foreign nations.

The main problem they have is their own spiritual forgetfulness. It's their own spiritual amnesia. They forget the goodness of God in his salvation.

And when we read the Bible and particularly when we read the Old Testament, sometimes we want to say, what are you guys doing? How can you be so slow? How can you be so forgetful? They turn to idols and the gods of other nations just after God has saved them and redeemed them and done so much for them.

[14 : 35] But the reality is that that same pitfall is true for us as Christians. I think one of the greatest dangers in the Christian life is this kind of spiritual amnesia.

It's when we forget who we are. We lose sight of who God is and what God has done. We forget that we are children of God saved by grace.

We forget how loved we are by our Father. We wander or we stray. We beat ourselves up over our spiritual performance. We tell ourselves that we're failures.

We maybe think that God could never love a person like me. But remembering who we are as a Christian can be one of our greatest challenges. St. Clafergusson, theologian and writer said this.

I think we used this quote before this summer, but he's so brilliant. I think it's worth repeating. He says, failure to deal with the presence of sin in our lives can often be traced back to spiritual amnesia.

[15 : 35] Forgetting our new, true, real identity. He says, as a believer, I am someone who's been delivered from the dominion of sin and darkness and who therefore is free and motivated to fight against the remnants of sin in my heart.

You must know, rest in, remember, think through and act on your new identity. You are in Christ. In other words, first and foremost as Christians, we need to remember every day.

We need to remind ourselves every day that our salvation is first and foremost not due to our own power or our own strength. Just like God's people here in Joshua, we need to remember that God is a God who acts for his people.

And I think this really is the point of the stones, the twelve stones that Joshua's told to put up after crossing the river. Because God knows for his people there's that temptation to forget, to trust in ourselves or worse, to trust in other gods and idols, both in their own day as God's people and in our own day today as Christians.

So these stones are to serve not just as a simple memorial to mark what's happened here, it's to be a constant reminder of who the people are and how God has acted on their behalf.

[16 : 54] The Hebrew concept of remembering involves far more than simply bringing to mind. It involves a deep reflection. It prompts us to action and it asks us to engage our affections as well as our minds.

So we have to remember what God has done. And this language really points us back to Exodus again to the Passover in chapter 12, where the Passover is to be an everlasting sign, an everlasting reminder of God's amazing salvation in bringing his people out of slavery.

God said through Moses, if we look at Deuteronomy, looking forward to a day where Israel is living a comfortable life, it says there, take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commands and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest when you have eaten and are full and you've built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, that your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you to do you good in the end.

Beware lest you say then in your heart, my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant, that he swore to your fathers as it is to this day.

So we always need to look back. We need to remember the God who has given us so much. And that's even more true the passage is saying when life is going well, when we're feeling prosperous, when we're not feeling like we're struggling or we're burdened or we're wandering.

[18 : 54] We always have to remember. Because here's the thing, sin blinds us. Sin makes us forget. Sin distorts our view of God and our view of ourselves.

So we forget how good a God he is. We forget who we are in Jesus Christ and we turn inward and we are exposed to all the sins of our hearts. It's not that we consciously decide one day to slip further away from God.

It's not that we decide to forget the God we love and the God who's blessed us. But sin makes us lose sight of that. There was a point last winter where I was driving up the A9 and I hadn't refilled my windscreen wash.

So by the time I got to Brewer I could not see a thing. My window was absolutely filthy. So I stopped at Brewer and I filled it up and I stuck the stuff on the window and the muck was wiped away. And what a contrast. What a contrast.

All of a sudden I could see clearly. And I realized that you can push any illustration slightly too far. But I think in a sense remembering who God is, repenting of our sin, looking at who we are in Christ is a wonderful kind of spiritual windscreen wash.

[20 : 06] It refreshes our view. It shows us clearly who God is and how good God is and how gracious and loving a Savior Jesus Christ is. The Apostle Paul passed on lots of advice to a young church leader called Timothy.

And in 2 Timothy 2 verse 8, Paul gave perhaps one of his most important pieces of advice. He says, remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead. A simple sentence, remember Jesus Christ.

I think when we as Christians are wracked with guilt and shame over our sin, when we're battling with the same weaknesses and the same temptations, or when we're just struggling with the stress and the busyness and the exhaustion of life, we have to remember Jesus.

We have to remember what he has done for us on the cross to secure our forgiveness, to save us from our sin, to give us this hope of a new life. This morning we were celebrating the Lord's Supper together as a church family, and it's wonderful having the Lord's Supper together.

But a really essential component of that is remembering. God has given us means. He has given us the ability to spend time together remembering what he has done.

[21 : 20] It helps us to reflect on what Christ has accomplished for us at such great a cost. And then there are implications here for us, not only in our own Christian walk, in remembering, in reflecting, but also in our witness to others as believers.

Because we see in this passage the point of the stones is to show that God's people experience his power and his love not only for their own sake, but so that others would see, others would witness.

When you're asked in the future it says, you shall tell them this is what God has done in order that all may know the hand of the Lord is mighty. And that means one of our goals as Christians, as God's people today, is for our lives and our experience to reflect what God has done so that we too witness and testify to God's power, to God's presence, with all of our flaws and our imperfections and our inadequacies.

So our testimony is never to be, look how great we are, look how wonderful I am as a Christian, but look how great my God is, look how amazing my Savior is.

This is a great reminder for us in the Christian life that we don't need to be the hero. We never need to be the hero, but we do need to point others to the great God who saves and redeems and restores.

[22 : 46] The Book of Joshua for us is a continual reminder that salvation is fundamentally about God and about what God has done for you. And so in our witness we want to demonstrate that to our neighbors and our friends and our family and our loved ones and the people that surround us.

So as we close this evening, the Book of Joshua teaches us that knowing who God is and remembering what God has done are both key aspects of life as God's people, as Christians today.

But here's the really amazing, incredible thing. No matter how much you might struggle at times to remember God, or how much you might wander away, God always remembers you.

In Jesus Christ, God always remembers you. Even when you feel so far away, there's never a second when you're not on his mind. May God help us to be a people who show others around us that we are a people who know God, who remember God, who love him and live for him with every fiber of our beings in all that we do this week.

Let's pray. Lord God, our loving Father, we thank you and praise you as your people, that you're a God who we can know, a God that we can come to and speak to, a God who knows us better than we know ourselves.

[24 : 10] And Lord God, we pray that we would grow in our knowledge of you. We will be a people who love you and live for you in all that we do. Father, help us to remember Jesus this week.

Help us, Lord God, tomorrow when we go to work. Help us when we're struggling with patience with our family, with our children. Help us, Lord God, to remember Jesus Christ.

Help us, Lord God, in our grief and our pain and our trials and our difficulties to remember Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord God, you would give us the strength and the ability to do so, and that in all we would glorify you in all that we say and all we do in Jesus' name. Amen.