

# Joshua 4

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[ 0 : 00 ] What do these stones mean? I'm here today because it's a hundred years since this congregation moved into its D Street Church in 1907.

In 1907, after the Union of 1900, the free church folk here had no building for seven years. They were then given the D Street Church and they remained there for the next 70 years.

On 7th July, there was an inaugural service in 1907 to mark the occasion of taking possession of the building.

And the preacher then was then Mordor McKenzie, then the free church moderator. And for those next 70 years, the building saw times of struggle and times of great blessing as well.

Sometimes numbers were very low and sometimes the Lord very much prospered the congregation. And in that building, which had been St. Columba Free Church before 1907, many found and many enjoyed eternal life.

[ 1 : 42 ] And it saw faithful ministries going their way back to those very early years. And through such well-known preachers as Dr. Alexander Rennick and Dr. Ross and the Reverend Duncan Leach and the Reverend Alvin McIntosh.

And then after the war, the Reverend Hugh G. McKay and then the Reverend Douglas Macmillan. And those men all in their own way had memorable and very much blessed ministries in the building.

As it also, the Reverend Ted of Cameron under his ministry moved, I think, to this building here in 1987. And it is for that reason that I'm really here today because it is important to recall these events.

Although I'm very conscious as I express that sentiment that the church today, the free church today, feels ill at ease with that kind of backward-lookingness.

And I'm very conscious that we feel burdened by our public image as a church that lives in the past, a church that fears change, a church bound to tradition.

[ 3 : 20 ] And that because of all these factors, we are kind of reluctant to recall what happened so many, many years ago.

And yet we look at the wider world around us, that wider world or secular society, is very much one that loves anniversaries.

And we've seen this year some important anniversaries such as that of the Falklands War, the abolition of slavery and the labours of William Wilberforce.

We recall every year the assassination of John Lennon. That's a very important anniversaries of so many people. And our whole land is littered with churns of various coins which commemorate the great and stirring events of our passage of the Crofts' land struggle following the First Great World War.

And so the world around us, the secular world, is very conscious of those past events.

[ 4 : 36 ] And not only every decade, every year sometimes, we have those anniversaries. And if we turn to the Bible, we find the same concern, not only to remember the past, but also to memorialize the past, to build monuments which remind us of that past, or to have institutions which remind us of that past.

For example, there was the Passover of which you reminded Israel of the exodus and all the glories of that event.

We have the Lord's Supper, which reminds us again in the New Testament, of the death and resurrection and the imminent second coming of our Lord and our Saviour.

In the Old Testament, we have other events or other monuments, memorials such as the Ebenezer, the stone erected by Samuel to commemorate, I think to you, over the Philistines, which guaranteed

peace for the whole of the rest of his life.

And then we come to the story of Joshua and those twelve stones. And we find here that at this moment, when the wilderness wandering us over, and when they're about to cross the Jordan, that Joshua was directed by God to build these two cairns, these two cairns, so twelve rocks each.

[ 6 : 19 ] Now there's some which abide to us to where in fact one of those cairns was. We know that one was on the side of the Promised Land, on the bank across the Jordan within the Promised Land.

The other cairns for the moment, I think, was on the far side, on the wilderness side of the Jordan. So there were two cairns, one, I think, on each side of the river.

And those two cairns had a very important function. And that function defined for us here that when your children ask, what do these stones mean?

You will tell them what those stones signify. And I want to build on this principle for a moment this morning, that to God history is important, that to God's people memory is important, and that to God's people memorias and reminders are also important.

And these stones will comprehend not only the ebony of Samuel, and those two cairns of Joshua, but also the churches of this land, which are all of them important monuments to our own Christian faith.

[ 7 : 56 ] And reminders to us of important aspects of our own history, because history is the bearer of all our principles.

Without history, we have no identity. Without history, we have no principles. And so I want to focus on these stones, and I could, among the stones, that D Street building going back to the 1850s, this building too going back, I think, to the 1890s, and those Reformation churches and Disruption churches, all of them which function as these stones of Joshua's day, as great symbols of the faith of Jehovah, the God of Israel.

So the question is, what do you mean by these stones? Well, first of all, these stones in these buildings remind us of great events.

We've been reminded once that it was not those stones themselves that turned back the Jordan. There was no virtue in the stones, no spiritual force or power in the stones.

And that's true of all our buildings. There is no virtue in the buildings themselves than any of the stones or cairns which serve us monuments to episodes in this of God's church, in this land of ours.

[ 9 : 31 ] And yet, while we insist on that, and while we exemplify our belief to that effect, and that we are moved from D Street to this building, nevertheless, those stones have their own important function.

And they remind us, as I said, of great events. When those Jewish children asked, what do those stones mean? They were told of this day when the people crossed the Jordan.

And they were told of the great, the stupendous miracle which made that crossing possible. when the Jordan waters stood still and they followed the ark of the Lord across on dry land and into the promised land.

And it was a reminder, they were a memorial to them of the power of God. And a reminder too of the faithfulness of God that He had fulfilled all the promise He had made in the moment of the Exodus.

And He had kept them all through that wilderness journey. And now here they were with their feet in the land of promise. And it wasn't their own power or their own strength or their own source or their own durability.

[ 10 : 59 ] But the Lord had done it. He had kept them through the wilderness. And He had enabled them to cross the Jordan in this unforgettable, in this stupendous way.

And the stones would stand there as a reminder to them of the mighty act of God. In the same way, our own buildings are often monuments to great acts of God.

In the past, D Street was a disruption building going back into the early years of the free church.

And although it was not in any sense a miracle, the disruption, it was nevertheless a great moment in our history when thousands of men and women stood faithful in loyalty to Christ and His sovereignty over His own church.

And the buildings there are reminders of the grace that God gave our forebears in those days of struggle.

And the disruption may seem to us perhaps nothing like the same level of divine act as this crossing of the Jordan.

[12:32] And yet, God's ongoing faithfulness, the assistance given to a forebears in moments of crisis, that surely is still something of which we ought to be jealous and which we ought to remember constantly.

It was said of Israel that they would never make it to the promised land. It was said of our free church forebears that they would never survive. It was said in 1900 that the church wouldn't survive. And yet, the stone stand and this building stands and you stand as living stones as memorials to the grace that appalls God's people in all ages.

ages. And so we've had those mighty events in biblical times, the Exodus, the crossing of the Jordan, we've had the Reformation with its own memorials, we've had the disruption, we've had the 1900 struggle, and all of these part of the ongoing story of God's people and of God's faithfulness. and most of the way that the church has so often defied the odds. If your 1907 forebears could see you today in surroundings such as these, and if they could see you with a very different social composition of the congregation compared to what it was our way back in 1907, they would have surely thanked God from the bottom of their hearts.

[14:15] I don't know the numbers in those days, I haven't shed that fact out, but if I recall, it was not as large a congregation as you represent here this morning, certainly nothing like this kind of building.

Do you remember at one time in the Second World War, Hitler made a famous boast that in a few weeks, England would have a snake run like a chicken.

And some months afterwards, after the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill referred to that comment by Hitler in very famous words, and he said, some chicken, some neck.

and time and again, men have danced on the grave of Christianity and written its obituary and danced on the grave of the free church and written its obituary.

And yet, those stones are here and you, the living stones, are here and we'll hear as monuments, not to ourselves or our personal endurance, but to the grace and faithfulness of our God.

[15:45] And so, the stones are monuments, reminders of those great events, events of which we still draw inspiration.

and then secondly, the reminders to us of great leaders. And of course, one hesitates over this as well.

Because what are men? And who wants to exalt or extol men? But you know, it was part of God's purpose in crossing the Jordan in this very spectacular way to enhance the status of Joshua among the people.

He had succeeded a great and in some ways incomparable leader. And I'm sure there would have been someone who would have said, he's not like the old man.

He's not a Moses. Not a Moses. This is only a Joshua. But the Lord was determined that he would exalt Joshua in the eyes of the people.

[17:00] You see that in chapter 3 and in verse 7. The Lord said to Joshua, today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel.

And that was God's determination. And that same point is made later on in chapter 4. And in verse 14, I think, that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all his field and there he built him all the days of his life just as he had revealed Moses.

He was God's chosen leader. And when generations afterwards saw those turns, they would associate the church not only with Yahweh their God and that great moment on the crossing of the Jordan but that associate those curses well with Joshua.

And he was memorialized in that great event. God and down the ages while the glory belongs to God alone yet God has raised up leaders and God has used them as mighty instruments to effect his own purposes and God has asked his church to remember and to revere those leaders.

Remember in the Old and New Testament Paul is concerned to praise Epaphroditus and concerned to praise Luke whose praise is in all the churches.

[18:44] And we today as we look at the stones of those disruption and reformation buildings we to remember not only God and God's act we remember also those and God raised up to lead the church through those moments of trial.

We remember the Madeleine Chapel in Edinburgh John Knox and his faithfulness and courage in the face of all the answers of the reformation and inner disruption church remember those and God raised up to lead us through that ten years conflict men like Thomas Chalmers and Robert Canlish and William Cunningham and so many others to whose leadership and scholarship and courage we owe so much and from his biographies and from his writings and from his examples we draw to this day such tremendous inspiration if we don't we ourselves are the losers Thomas Chalmers a great organizer and a great inspirer of men and women and a great pioneer in social reform and in social work and one who made the foundations of her own attitude in

Scotland towards science and he said the church must not go down the road of a coalition with science and we owe to Chalmers still that great legacy and to Menlick Robert Canvish another great organizer and we owe to Menlick Cunningham and to George Sweeten and James Buchanan the incomparable legacy of her Scottish theological heritage age and we must go back the spirituality of the Boners and of McChain and the tremendous inspirational missionary work of Alexander Duff and William Chalmers Burns and many today remember William Chalmers Burns we all know OMF and we all know the China Inland mission from which OMF came and we remember Hudson Taylor but do remember this

God William Chalmers Burns was used by God so might in 1842 and in Persia and the whole Lawrence around that same time as a great revivalist evangelistic preacher who left it all and who went to China around 1846 and became the first missionary effect who went native learned the local dialect expressed that the local Chinese had died in solitude in a chief hotel in China and whose policy it was to sow the seed whenever he saw the seed about to blossom to bear fruit he left and went somewhere else and it was on Burns example that Hudson Taylor built and yet the barn so forgotten not least by ourselves here it's got one of our heroes you know these men didn't have telephone contact with whom they left and that was it they left all they knew all they loved and they went into this vast land of China and you know do we just add that that's yesterday are they inferior because they're not moderns are they less than we because they don't use the latest technology there is there is such inspiration on these people there is so much there to make us feel so humble and to realize how little we do how little we suffer in the course of

Christ and the gospel and so God raised them up and these stones these buildings are memorials to these men and I say for this reason that today we should be asking the Lord Lord please raise up some some to lead us some who will inspire some who will reorganize some who will rethink that it is God who gives he gave some Lord give us some give us Knox's give us Melville's give us Henderson's give us Chalmers's give us these men give us even the Colin Bonitimes despised as public figures these 1900 men and yet so courageous in their quiet herosim and so we should be asking the

[ 24 : 13 ] Lord Lord in the past you raised up the Joshua's and the Moses raised up those people to lead the Deborah's and perhaps the woman may come to be the leaders I don't know but anyway God needs to raise up those who lead us as raised up Joshua in this age and so memorials are great events memorials are great leaders but monuments to to the greatness of ordinary people the greatness of ordinary people because whatever was done by the leaders could not have been done without the self sacrificing efforts and liberality of the thousands who followed themudible and in Deestes in particular there was a congregation of people in humble circumstances mainly exiled Highlanders members of Aberdeen's

Gallic community and yet these people like thousands all over Scotland provided the money from their own meagre earnings to build the churches that still decorate this land it appears that of all the Aberdeen churches, D.C. was the poorest the poorest people and the poorest congregation and when Murdoch Mackenzie, picture that inaugural Sunday in 1707 it's very plain that he was very very conscious of the hurt being inflicted on the poor folk who had to vacate the building to make way for the free church congregation and he lamented that it was the poorest church in the city that was asked to make this particular sacrifice sacrifice but all over Scotland from the borders to the Arknies ordinary people dug into their pockets to raise to build those churches to raise the funds that made the church possible away back there in 1843 last weekend

I was in Dorno and I was amazed to hear that the church there was built in 1844 less than a year after the resurrection a magnificent building solid well mason sandstone within a year and in the highlands amid all the poverty of the clearances that huge church in Helmsdale 800 people built by those cleared from Fildonland and those other inland areas of Sutherland and they said something

inspiring in that fact yes the great leaders but as Saba said the power of lillies and the pennies of the poor the involvement of the people in all this great work they built four great theological three great theological colleges churches they built multiples of churches in every city in the land they built great educational centers like Mary House in Edinburgh or free church institution they set up missions all over the world yes because they are great leaders but also because of the dedication of the grassroots because of the pennies of the poor and in a way it's here too we don't know who the twelve men were who carried these rocks and who built those curtains they had undamed they had forgotten and yet they played their own part as did all the people who crossed that day and it is this interaction between the leaders and the led the question perhaps at some levels is supporting we had leaders would we be led by that the disruption and those other great leaders in the church in Scotland the two coalesced there were great leaders and there were great people and so these are memorials to us of great events of great leaders and of the greatness of ordinary people but memorials too of the great principles that should guide the church

I said before that history is the carrier of our principles forget it and we forget our principles I'm not going to go down through all those principles but two or three perhaps for a moment I can just be finaciated the principle first of all of the right of the people to choose and call their own ministers that was the great point of the disruption it can be put in other terms but that was the core issue that the right to choose a pastor lay not with the state not with the land owner not with the presbytery not with the church session but lay with the people they had the right not only to veto somebody else's choice but they had the right to nominate and the right to elect it was entirely a matter of the people's choice and it was important such hammers because the alternative is that you secularize the church if the state or the land owner chooses the ministry it will choose one that suits its own purposes one that will not threaten by the radicalness of its evangelism the people must choose their own ministers because the sheep know the shepherd and they know who will feed their souls that which is an important principle and every free church in this land you may say just a pile of stones but

D street even in its current state and this building as an old free church building are all monuments to that principle to this right that you have to choose your own ministers and I will dare to say also I don't want to go down into politics at the moment but you know that principle is one that you can't take for granted and one which is constantly threatened with erosion when you are given simply the right to veto a nominee of where people appoint rather than nominate and elect then that principle is in danger and you must genuinely safeguard that principle that it is your unqualified right and your right I tell you without reasons to reject it is your right to choose to choose because you like because you like entirely unqualifiedly you right the people's right the right of popular election and there was a very interesting detail there just after 1844 that when the free church decided its statute on that particular issue in an act of assembly it deliberately allowed that women should have an equal right in that election an equal right with men the first time I think that that was conceded within [ 33 : 26 ] Scottish theological history now it wasn't explicit they don't mention the woman but they simply say the right belongs to all communicant members there was no gender barrier of any kind and that whole issue of your right to choose is somebody which D Street and this building and John of Free Church and Housdale and the Free Church College all these piles of stones are memorials to that great principle and to this principle too the importance of a clear creed that safeguards the fundamental beliefs and core doctrines of the Christian faith and I'm coming down there to the struggle of 1900 and the story of the Wee Free

Church you know 1843 was a great occasion four hundred of Scotland's greatest pictures and Scotland's greatest intellects leaving the Church of Scotland in a moment of high drama to the acclaim of a nation and then nineteen hundred twenty-six unknown men the ramp of that great free church they had stood outside the proposal to form the united free church and they had simply stood by the constitution and testimony of the old free church of 1843 now what was the core issue the core issue in many ways wasn't so clear at the time but it's very clear now it was the question does the church have a confession of faith to which all its office bearers are bound without qualification it wasn't a debate about this doctrine of confession or that other doctrine of confession it was about a confession itself can the people be sure that every minister believes every doctrine in this confession can we be sure that one preacher will not contradict the message of another it was the old affirmation principle of a common preaching you might not hear in every free church in the land the same pulpit prayers you might not see the same order of worship you might not even hear

the same psalms being sung or from 1872 onwards the same hymns being sung but one thing you knew every pulpit would preach the doctrines of the confession of faith there will be a common preaching a unanimity on the great doctrines you would not hear denial of the great gospel miracles of virgin birth and the resurrection you would hear no denial of the deity of

Christ or justification by faith alone or God's sovereign predestination you would hear no denial of the doctrine of eternal punishment because on these things the church and its teachers stood firm united in the faith there were peripherals which were not in the confession on which there was liberty of opinion but the confession itself those great doctrines obviously stood firm and the forebears warned and they said if you pass that declaratory act if you lose the ministry from its confession in a generation you will have unlimited freedom to deny this and deny that you will have unlimited theological pluralism you will have preachers who deny the virgin birth and deny the resurrection and the deity of Christ and deny every single doctrine that are forebears held here that was the issue doctrines on which we are all agreed on which we want cast iron guarantees that no deacon and no elder no probationer no minister no professor no missionary will deny these doctrines that will preach them with all the power of his heart and soul that was the principle of these poor 26 men the word laughed said there wasn't among them a single man of affairs not one yet in many ways their position and their conduct was more heroic than even that of charmers himself and we still stand on that same principle of those doctrines in which we are all agreed and there was another thing too it was this

I said the first principle was you right to choose your own minister the second was this commitment to a common theology and the third was the insistence on the sovereignty of the risen saviour over the whole of public life you may have heard in terms of the establishment principle which was one of the points of the issue but to reduce that to its simplicities the issue was that of a national religion that is is the sovereignty of Christ limited to the private sphere to my moments of leisure to my inner life or does Christ reign over civic affairs and over political affairs and when they said we believe in the establishment principle they were saying

Christ is Lord of every inch of life not simply of the private but of the public domain and that is so important down to the present day Christ is risen Christ is Lord and when the cabinet of this united kingdom meets Christ is risen and Christ is its Lord and it's every decision and it's every statute must be regulated with the awareness of the sovereignty of the risen saviour and controlled by the authority of the moral law and yes I know you say to me that's impracticable today because we live in a pluralist society impracticable yes it is impracticable because our forefathers lost the battle in 1900 and because the churches went down this road of saying religion is a private affair it's a personal affair why why are we in

[ 42 : 06 ] Iraq today why are we so often staggering through unchristian fiscal policies and unchristian social policies because we have thrown away this and we said to Jesus in the cabinet you stay outside the cabinet room you stay outside the council chamber you writ this not run here and the result I will tell you is not simply or fundamentally a lawless society there's no shortage of law it is a loveless and uncaring society that is the end product of the expulsion of the man of Masser of Galilee who went about doing good these stones speak of those great principles you write to choose you write to guarantee that you hear the gospel in every church the whole gospel and nothing but the gospel that is your right and your belief your commitment to this great fact that the sovereign lord and the ten commandments govern every area of life two points as

I close one is the importance of sacred space this building as your sacred space you have your sacred time your holy day the Sabbath the Lord's day but you also have this sacred space this space which is dedicated to the worship of God designed for the worship of God a building designed to emphasize that you worship God by listening to his word in a liturgy of listening the primacy of preaching designed for the praise and prayers of God's people hallowed by association Lord's day after Lord's day this sacred space we need sacred time that is ring fenced from all other time and we need this sacred space here ring fenced so that here we worship the living God these stones are a monument to the importance of that sacred space but finally this the importance of our children verse 6 when your children ask poor children where in the land today are the stimuli to prompt that question where in the church today are the stimuli to prompt that question suppose were to ask daddy tell me about the reformation tell me about the covenanters tell me about the disruption tell me about 1900 shall we say oh son that's the past what in heaven's name do we mean by these stones why are the stones here how did this church come to be here we are

in such horrific danger of falling pristine and falling prey to a minimalist religion and a minimalist theology a few basic evangelical simplicities what do you mean by these stones things the children must be taught the history of the people from whom they came and they have come from those ancient distroits their spiritual heirs of those who crossed the Jordan but they are the spiritual heirs too of

Augustine Luther Calvin and Knox of Chalmers and Cunningham 1843 1900 I believe that the story of the Protestant church in Scotland is one of the greatest and most creditable stories in human history the story of which its children knew nothing and for the teaching of which we now make no provision when your children ask what is the meaning of these stones