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Speaker: Pastor Jeff Poush
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Title of sermon: **God's Plan to Build an Altar**
Series: Blueprint - #1

Joshua 4:1-6 - NIV:

4 1 When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, **2** "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, **3** and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." **4** So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, **5** and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, **6** to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?'

Last week I was talking to a friend of mine. This friend's been married for 50 years. And we were just talking back and forth about the things that he's learned in marriage. And it was funny -- he said, when he first got married, he was "dumber than a box of rocks." These are his words, not mine. And I thought -- "Well, he doesn't have a very high opinion of rocks, does he?" 'Cause he wasn't complimenting himself. It's a funny phrase. We use that term a lot. For many of us, we look at a rock and we're like -- big deal. It's an inanimate, hard, unfeeling object. Maybe for you, when you look at a rock, you think -- "That's an intruder. That's an invader. Something to get rid of." If you've got a rock in your shoe, you're gonna sit down, and you're gonna take your shoe off and dump that rock out. If you're digging a garden, if you're planting a garden, and you come across a big ol' rock -- that rock's an intruder, we gotta get rid of it. Maybe you're out mowing the grass, and you come across a rock. What are you gonna do? You're gonna get rid of that intruder. But if you're like me, when you see a rock, that's an invitation! It's an invitation to go pick it up and throw it at something. If you're near a body of water, you've gotta pick that rock up and see how far you can throw it! Or if it's flat, you're gonna skip that rock. I love rocks. If I'm walking down the road, and I see a rock, something inside of me, an instinct takes over. I cannot NOT walk over and kick that rock! I love rocks.

So, regardless of whether you look at rocks and you think -- "They're dumb" -- or you look at a rock and you think, "That's an invader that I need to get rid of" -- or whether you love rocks, and you see them as an invitation to experience joy, my hope today is to completely change the way you look at rocks. Why? Well, because there was a day God did that very thing for the Nation of Israel. He said, "For many of you, you're gonna see this as just an inanimate, dead, unfeeling object. But I see it altogether differently. And I want to change your perspective off of a rock and onto my provision. On my ability to keep my promises. I want to change the way you see rocks." And that's what I want to do for you today. So, let me set the scene. How did God change and reorient the Nation of Israel off of a rock and onto Himself? Well -- the Nation of Israel spent a considerable amount of time wandering in the wilderness. They were in captivity for many years in Egypt, and God sent a deliverer. He sent Moses to rescue His people and lead them out of Egypt, out of captivity, into what He called the Promised Land. But for 40 years the Nation of Israel wandered. They experienced hardship. They had trials. They experienced loss. They had obstacle after obstacle after obstacle. And yet, they continued to persist in their journey. It was a long journey. And as that journey came to an end after 40 years, they came up against one more obstacle. It was the Jordan River. "We're coming to you live from the banks of the mighty Willamette" -- and this must have been what it felt like for the Nation of Israel as they were approaching the Promised Land, and they walk up to the

banks of the Jordan River, and they think, "Here we go again. How in the world are we going to get across this insurmountable barrier between us and the Promised Land?" Well, God spoke to their leader, Joshua. He said, "Joshua, I've got a plan. I'm gonna follow through on my promise. You might think you're done, but I'm not done. I've got a plan. Here's what I want you to do, Joshua. I want you to send the priests ahead of the people. I want you to take the ark." The ark was a symbol of God's presence with the people. And He told Joshua, "I want you to send the priests carrying the ark. Just step -- just step out in faith into that Jordan River, and you watch what happens." So they did.

The moment those priests stepped into the river, God did a miracle. Just like He did with the Red Sea -- He held the waters back, so the people were able to cross over on dry land. And after that, God did something very, very interesting. Let me read to you from the Book of Joshua what happened after this miraculous event. Joshua chapter 4 says, "When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, 'Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests stood, and carry them over with you, and put them down at the place where you will stay tonight.'" God had 12 men walk back into that river bed and pick up a rock, and they carried those rocks over to the other side, the side where the Promised Land was, and He had them stack them up. Why? Because He wanted the people to have a physical reminder of what He had done. Those people needed a reminder. They needed something tangible, a memorial, an altar if you will, to remind them of this unbelievable event, this miraculous event that they should never forget. So, after those men were obedient and they took those stones, listen to what Joshua says later. He said to the Israelites, "In the future, when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' Tell them, Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground. For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what He had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the people of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful, and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."

Why did God have them build an altar? Because, if someone would have asked the Israelites, "So, how was your trip?" "Tell me about your journey." "What were the last 40 years like for you?" -- you know what the Israelites would have been very justified to say? Things like, "Man, the desert sure was hot!" "Man, there's nothing worse than getting sand in your eye!" "Um -- kinda got sick of the manna!" "You should see the blisters on my feet!" "Uh, my mom and dad passed away out there." The Israelites would have had so many justifiable reasons to list the negative things, the hardships, the unmet expectations, the barriers and the obstacles. But God didn't want them focused on that. He wanted them focused on His provision, on His kept promise, and He needed something physical. Not because they were evil people, not because they were dumb, but because they were human! We all need reminders. We are prone to forget. And when we build an altar, when we put something physical down, a memorial, you know what it does? At first, it catches our eye. Then it grips our heart. Then it resets our memory. That's what an altar does -- an altar resets our memory, and it takes our perspective off of our circumstances and it puts our perspective back on the mighty hand of God, and that's exactly how Chapter 4 ends. Joshua tells the people, "When your descendants are walking down the banks of this river, and they say, 'Hey Dad, what's that big pile of rocks for?' You know what it's gonna do? It's gonna reset Dad's memory, and he's gonna say, 'Son, sit down. I've got a story to tell you. You've never gonna believe this! These rocks memorialize. They remind us of the day that God did this incredible miracle. And not only that -- let me tell you about the Red Sea! Let me tell you about water that poured out of a rock! Let me tell you about this really cool flaky bread that God gave us every single day.'" You see, a memorial helps us remember God's provision. Because there's another day coming. And we're gonna have to be reminded that God is at work in our lives.

Friends, you and I have had a hard journey. 2020's been difficult. 2020 has been a year full of "no's," a year full of unmet expectations -- it's been hard. It's been a long journey. And you and I need a

memorial. We need something that will catch our eye and it will remind us. I don't mean to diminish the hardships and the trials that we have encountered over this past year. But it's actually because of those hard times that we need a reminder all the more. We need to build an altar -- something physical, so that when we hit a dry patch, when we hit a period of our spiritual lives where we feel like our prayers aren't being answered, we begin to wonder, "God, do you care about me at all?" "God, do you even exist?" We need something so that when we look out our back window and we see that pile of rocks, it grips our heart and then it resets our memory, and we think, "Oh yeah, I remember that rock. I remember that rock represents the day we adopted our child. After years of waiting and endless piles of paperwork! And a lot of dollars! That rock represents our child coming home. Oh, and that rock -- I remember that relationship that I never thought would be restored, and yet God allowed us to humble ourselves and to forgive ourselves. Oh yes, and that rock and that rock and that rock." You see, when we build an altar, when we allow our eye to be focused on something that will jar our memory, it allows us to take our eyes off of our circumstances and to remember the mighty hand of God. Just like the Israelites did. So, I want to encourage you to memorialize 2020. Whatever the size of your family -- if it's just you, sit down with pen and paper and write down the things that God has done this last year that have been good. And if you're part of a bigger family, sit on the couch, and go around the circle, and ask one another, "What is something good that God has done?" And maybe, for you and your family, you're gonna want to go out back, and you're gonna want to put a pile of rocks in the yard. For others, you might not want to do that. You can do something simple. You can grab a vase or a jar like this and get some marbles and throw some marbles in there. You can get a journal and just list them. There are a myriad of things that you can do to memorialize and to commemorate the good things God has done, because we need to be reminded. We're prone to forget. All throughout the New Testament, we have things like baptism and communion. These are visual reminders of important things that God has done that we can't forget.

So, friends, what do you need to memorialize? What altar do you need to build so that you will never forget the way God has been involved in your life? Yes, there have been trials. Yes, there are unmet expectations, and there are barriers that we all have to face. But God has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. Jesus said, "In this world there will be trials, but -- take heart, for I have overcome the world." Some people will look at this and they'll see nothing more than a pile of dumb old rocks. But my friends, my hope and my prayer is that you will do what God asked the Israelites to do. It's to look at these rocks and not see inanimate, cold, unfeeling objects, but rather, to see the mighty hand of God that has been at work in your life and will be at work in your life, because He's a promise keeper. He's a good God who loves to bless His children. So, this is going to be the last sermon you hear in 2020, and my hope is that it will remind you that a memorial, an altar that you might build, that it will remind you that there's a better day coming. That God is with you, and that He will do miracles in your life as you look to Him and you get your eyes off of your circumstances. I pray that when you look out your back window, that that memorial will first catch your eye, then it will grip your heart and it will reset your memory to God's activity and His engagement in your life. Because He's good and He loves you.

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