

# When Your Children Ask

David H. Roper

---

Children have many endearing qualities about them. Perhaps one of the most engaging is their tendency to ask questions no one can answer. As a matter of fact, I am not sure there are any answers for some of their questions. I have a lot of answers, but somehow my answers rarely seem to coincide with my children's questions! "How high is up?" "How far is there?" A couple of weeks ago my young son Joshua asked me, "Why is Friday?" Try to answer that one!

Perhaps you have heard the story of the little boy who asked his father, "How tall is the Eiffel Tower?" His father said, "I don't know, son; I don't have any idea." The boy said, "How far is it from here to China?" His dad said, "I just don't know, son." "Well, how deep is the deepest part of the ocean?" His father said, "I really don't have any idea." The little boy said, "Daddy, how--oh never mind." His dad said, "That's all right, son. Ask questions. It's the only way you can get answers!" We recognize that our children are naturally inquisitive. It is the way they learn. Someone once asked Isidor Rabi, the well-known physicist and Nobel Prize winner, what he attributed his inquiring spirit to. His response was that each day when he came home from school his mother would ask him, "Isidor, did you ask any good questions today?"

I am convinced that the naturally inquisitive spirit children have is designed by God to lead them into a knowledge of the truth. And we parents have an opportunity to be primary agents in that process. This at least is the point of view that Scripture takes, and I would like to point you to a passage of Scripture which underlines this principle: Joshua, chapter 4. (We are setting aside our study in Zechariah for awhile, because there are some important reasons this month to study parts of the book of Joshua together. Sometime this Fall we will return to our study in Zechariah and then go on to Malachi.)

Joshua is the sixth book in the Old Testament. The first five books--Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy--are the books of Moses. And then follows Joshua.

As you may know, Joshua is concerned with the conquest of Canaan. Within one generation, the small group of Israelites that came out of Egypt dispossessed the entire population of Palestine. We are so accustomed to reading the account and having it told to us as children that we sometimes lose sight of the monumentality of that achievement. It is absolutely unparalleled in history. There has never been anything like it. From the literature of this time we know that for a thousand years or more before the Israelites conquered Palestine, the Canaanite city-states were laid out geographically in patterns designed to optimize their ability to support one another militarily, and they had proven absolutely impregnable. They had stood against all the powers of the ancient Near East. Yet when Joshua and his group of ex-slaves invaded the land, within one generation they had displaced almost the entire population! That is something unique in history. It never happened before, and has not happened since. It is so extraordinary that most modern, liberal, Old Testament historians have taken the approach that the book of Joshua is untrustworthy, and they have developed very radical re-interpretations of Israelite history in order to explain this conquest. It is unparalleled, so they presume it could not have occurred.

But those of us who know the Lord know that he is always doing highly improbable things--things he has never done before. If you are facing a week in which you have some difficult decisions to make, or you are facing a situation you have never faced before, and you are casting about for a way of solving the problem or meeting the demand, remember that the Lord is always doing things which exceed our expectations, which are absolutely unparalleled in our experience or in anyone else's. If we let our lives be styled by this view of the Lord's ability, he will do totally unique things in our lives--just as he did in the history of Israel. In a very brief time--twenty to

twenty-five years--this motley group of former slaves drove out a very powerful, deeply entrenched people.

Chapters 3 and 4 of Joshua deal with the most significant event in the conquest. It is not the actual campaign, as we might expect. It is the entrance into Canaan across the river Jordan. There are two events in the history of Israel which the prophets refer to time and time again as the most significant in the history of Israel. The first is the deliverance from Egypt and the passage through the Red Sea with Moses. That is when they became a nation. From a group of slaves they became a people. The New Testament says that they were "baptized into Moses," identified with Moses, and they became a nation at this point in their history. The second most important event was the journey, as one of the prophets describes it, "from Shittim to Gilgal"--this short, six-mile march from the east bank of the Jordan river to the west bank. This was so significant because it was in this action that they received the Land. From this point on, they were fighting a battle which was already won. By an act of the will, they crossed Jordan. And, by that act, Canaan was theirs. Though there were still battles to be fought, and the campaign had to be carried out, and there were some very difficult things that transpired; nevertheless the Land was theirs. God told Joshua, "Every spot of ground that your foot rests upon is yours." It was theirs by right of inheritance, and they entered into it by stepping across Jordan.

As is always the case in the Old Testament, when the prophets or writers of Scripture speak to Israel, they also speak over Israel's shoulder to us. These are truths which have application to us as well. We, like Israel, are involved in a journey, although ours is not geographical--we are not going from Egypt through the wilderness to Canaan--ours is spiritual. The deliverance from Egypt is a picture in our life of salvation. This is what salvation entails. We are taken out of the grasp of the world. Paul says, "We are transferred, or transplanted, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son." So the dominion of the world and the flesh over us is broken, and we are set free. We are no longer slaves. That is a picture of our salvation, of our redemption, of the time when we ask Christ to come into our life.

It is evidently the purpose of God that each one of us spend some time in the wilderness, because that is where we learn to do things on a different basis. Most of us transfer out of the world's way of doing things, but for a long time we try to sustain our spiritual life on the same basis that we sustained ourselves as non-Christians--by doing it ourselves, by counting on our own resources. So there needs to be some time in the wilderness, as there was some time allotted for Israel, in order for us to learn that God does things on an entirely different basis.

But it is not his intention that we stay there for forty years, as the Israelites wandered for forty years. There were at least two Israelites, Caleb and Joshua, who came out of Egypt determined to make the Lord Lord in every area of their lives. They could have gone immediately into the Land, with perhaps but a brief period of delay. But the bulk of the people wandered for a time before making a commitment to enter the Land. And with most of us, that is our experience. The entry into the Land across the Jordan is a symbol of our decision to make Christ Lord in our life. Some of you may have made that decision when you came out of Egypt. But others may not have understood that when you invited Christ to come into your life, he intended to come in as Lord. So there was another decision to be made downstream, which enabled you to enter into the fullness of rest in Christ.

You only have that rest when Christ is Lord. Someone has said that we only have the abounding life when we have abandoned ourselves to God. As long as we keep strings attached, we cannot really enjoy our life in Christ. The problem with many of us is that we are just Christian enough to be miserable, but not Christian enough really to enjoy our relationship to the Lord! We are like the Israelites in the wilderness. There is bitterness, and we are rebelling against authority. We still have our idols with us. There are all sorts of things from the old life that we have brought over with us, and we are still clinging to them. It takes time before we learn how miserable the wilderness is. But the only way to have any freedom whatever in our Christian experience is to take our hands off all of these things and say, "Lord, I want you to run my life." And this is when we begin to enjoy life. There are still battles, still problems. Things still are difficult at times. But this is when the Christian life becomes a joy instead of a trial. This is what the Israelites experienced. Once they got into the Promised Land, they found a place of rest. Though there were battles there, yet they could enjoy the fruit of the land, and could fully understand what it meant to be God's people. That is why this event is so significant in the history of Israel. It is when they entered

into rest.

The last paragraph of chapter 3 describes the actual crossing of the river. The Lord instructed Joshua to send the Ark of the Covenant first. So this ark, which was a symbol of God's presence with his people, was sent into the Jordan. The passage indicates that the river was at flood stage. It was the time of harvest, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks. It was a very formidable barrier. I am sure that in your own experience you discovered that when you were determined to enter the Land, when you were through walking in the wilderness and were ready to let Christ rule in your life, there were a great many obstacles to that decision. It seemed the worst possible time to fling your life away; it seemed rather to be the time to preserve it. This is what the Israelites were confronted with. Here was the Jordan rushing by, and yet they were told to move into its flow. The Levites lifted the ark onto their shoulders and stepped out into the river, and the passage describes the river's rolling back as far as Adam, a little city to the north of the Dead Sea, so that they were able to walk across the Jordan on dry ground.

In chapter 4 the account continues. If you read the first nine verses, and then verses 15 through 22, you will have the events in sequence:

**Now it came about when all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan, that the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight' " So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the sons of Israel, one man from each tribe; and Joshua said to them, "Cross again to the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel. Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. 'So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever."**

**And thus the sons of Israel did, as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, just as the Lord spoke to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel; and they carried them over with them to the lodging place, and put them down there. Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the feet of the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing, and they are there to this day.**

Now to verse 15:

**Now the Lord said to Joshua, "Command the priests who carry the ark of the testimony that that they come up from the Jordan." So Joshua commanded the priests, saying, "Come up from the Jordan." And it came about when the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord had come up from the middle' of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up to the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks as before.**

**Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month and camped at Gilgal on the eastern edge of Jericho. And those twelve stones which they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the sons of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What are these stones?' then you shall inform your children, saying, 'Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.'"**

There were two cairns, two monuments, which were erected with the stones taken from the middle of the Jordan. One was in the very center of the Jordan where the priests had stood with the ark. The other was erected on the west bank, at Gilgal. When the priests stepped up out of the river bed, then the Jordan flowed again as before and covered the monument in the river, except perhaps for the very tip of it. The stones were large--they were actually

carried on their backs, not their shoulders--so the pile could have been large enough that the tip of it was visible from the west bank. They were told that these monuments would provide opportunities for instruction. The children would ask, "What do these stones mean?" Children will always ask, and this would become the opportunity for an explanation of this great truth.

We have already said that this was one of the most important events in the history of Israel. For them, it signified the cutting off of their past. They made the decision to step into the land, and all of the old life was cut off from them. In fact, I am convinced that the name "Hebrew" comes from this event. Seven times this book says they "crossed over." The Hebrew verb which is used is the term from which the word Hebrew comes. They knew themselves to be people who had crossed over, who had left something behind.

It is interesting that throughout the Old Testament the term is used by neighboring Gentile nations in a derogatory sense-- "Those are the Hebrews, the people who crossed over!"--just as the early Christians were called that in a derogatory sense at Antioch: "Christians--those associated with Christ!" Their name was something that cut them off from their old world. Paul describes our life in Christ as having the world crucified to us, and us to the world. It is cut off. And that is what happened to Israel. They were cut off from all the other people. They were a new nation, a new entity. They had a new law, a new way of doing things, which was totally different, totally disassociated from the people around them. That is what this event meant in their experience.

I believe that in our experience, this event is the counterpart of the truth expressed in Romans 6. This passage describes our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. Paul says that we have been "baptized" into Christ. The term means to be "placed into" Christ, to be identified with him. What Christ went through in his death, burial, and resurrection, we go through. He not only died for our sins, Paul says; we died with him. We were identified with him. And just as the ark passed through the Jordan, a symbol of the Lord in the midst of his people, so the Lord went through a death, burial, and resurrection. Now, as Paul says in Romans 6, death no longer has any claim over him. Death cannot touch him. Sin cannot touch him--dead men do not sin. All the debts accrued in the past are gone. The old life has no power, no influence. He is free. He is a new man. Christ, who never sinned, assumed our sins, and in his death was separated from all of them. And Paul says that we were placed into Christ.

Now, this is something we cannot understand rationally. It is something that only the Spirit of God can make real to us. But it is true. Just as the twelve men of Israel crossed with the ark and so were identified with it in the passage through the Jordan, so we with Christ passed through death, burial, and resurrection. Thus the old life has been cut off. Paul puts it so beautifully: "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new. We have died, but we have become alive in Christ. Paul says that we are crucified with Christ; nevertheless we live. Yet we are not the ones who live: it is Christ living in us. And the life we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. That is the great, central fact of the Bible! We have been identified with Christ. We have died with him; we have been buried with him; we have been raised to newness of life with him. We are to know this and to act upon it. And when we identify ourselves, by an act of the will, with Jesus Christ in that death, burial, and resurrection, then we begin to experience real life. We have a new quality of life--a resurrection kind of life. This is the most fundamental, basic fact of Christian experience, just as in the life of Israel this was the most foundational fact. They had committed themselves to crossing the Jordan, and when the river flowed back they were cut off from the life they had formerly lived. They could not go back; it was all over. They were new creatures. Now we are to enjoy, that we are to experience that.

But there is something more. We are to teach that to our children. We are to teach it out of our own experience, and we are to teach it verbally. I am sure that not too long after this event, a little child walking beside the river Jordan saw that pile of stones out in the middle of the river, and said to his father, "Father, how in the world did those stones get out there?" And his dad said, "Sit down, son, and let me tell you." And he began to tell of his own experience in passing through the Jordan on dry ground, and discovering the newness of life in the land. He was teaching right out of his own experience. And the Scriptures call us back to this time and time again. As parents we are not only responsible to act upon the truth, but we also have a responsibility to instruct our children. It is

both a responsibility and a privilege.

This principle is stated again and again throughout the Scripture. As we shall see as we go through the book of Joshua in the next few weeks, there were a number of these memorials erected throughout the land, which children would notice and comment on, and which therefore would become an occasion for further teaching.

Now let's turn back to Deuteronomy 6, because the same principle is stated there in slightly different form. This is the bedrock statement of Jewish faith, the basis of all their understanding of the nature of God, verse 4:

**"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart...."**

This is where we all must begin as parents--by loving the Lord with all our heart, and by taking the Word itself to heart. We are to respond to the truth in obedience. Now, none of us ever acts perfectly, but that is to be our heart's intention. Then there is a second responsibility:

**...and you shall teach them diligently [literally, "incisively, sharply, precisely, to the point"] to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**

It is a typical characteristic of the Old Testament to express things in symbolic ways. The reference to writing things on your forehead and on the doorposts of your house was never intended to be taken merely literally. It also has a symbolic value. The Lord is referring here to the attitudes and the actions of individuals within the house. How do we go about solving our problems? Do we act out of the realization that our old life has been crucified with Christ, that we have a new Lord, a new way of doing things? Is that the intention of our heart, and do our actions reflect that?

Then the next step is to instruct our children, both in formal ways and informally. When we sit down, in a more structured situation, and when we walk by the way and when we lie down--as we work and play together and are involved in various activities as a family, we instruct our children by the attitudes of our heart, and by our actions, and by our words. Over and over again the Scriptures keep coming back to this responsibility we have as parents. This is never rescinded anywhere in the Scriptures. The primary responsibility for the instruction of children rests on their parents.

I want to take a few minutes to describe for you something which is on our hearts as Elders of Peninsula Bible Church. We want to take seriously this injunction as parents to teach our children. I do, as a parent, and I know you do. All of us feel our weakness in this area. I do not think any of us do particularly well in this, but we want to.

And the world has taken so much away from us as parents. When I was a kid, my dad taught me to drive by putting me in a 1934 Chevy, aiming me down a country road, and running for his life! Now the schools provide this service. They do it well, but the result is that we don't do it. My son Randy went to get a hunting license some time ago. They would not let him have the license until he had an NRA certificate. So he had to go someplace and get training on how to use a rifle safely before they would give him a hunting license. There is a good reason for this, because parents no longer teach their sons this sort of thing, someone else does. Someone else teaches our children to swim. Many of the things that normally were done by fathers and sons have been taken over by agencies. They do it well, but this is not the way God set it up.

And we Elders feel that in many ways we have done this same thing in the church. We have taken the world's philosophy right into our thinking about children, and we ship them off to someone else for their teaching. But by

God's grace, we would like to reverse that trend.

As a Board of Elders we have spent more time over the past three years on the subject of our children than on any other topic. We have discussed our Sunday school, and the operation of our Sunday school, and its ministry to our children at great length. And yet we are aware of the fact that our Sunday school is not in good shape. There are many very faithful teachers in it who have been laboring faithfully for years, but who are frustrated and weary. Many of them are ready to quit, and we cannot blame them. It seems that nothing we have been able to do has paid off--at least not along the lines that we would like to see. Because we are really serious about getting the truth to our children! We love these kids, as all of you do who are their parents, and we want to get the truth to them. We have come to the conclusion that the Lord is saying something to us, and we want to make some changes. Now, we have not been this way before, and we are not sure where we are going. When we get there we will tell you where we have been!

But we do know two steps that God has indicated to us, and as a Board of Elders we have voted unanimously to move in this direction. First, we are going to do something about our Sunday school. We are going to change it. Starting the last Sunday in July, there will be a very brief teaching time--fifteen to twenty minutes, maximum. Then these children will be taken to a gym or to a park. We are going to play games with them, and sing with them, and expose them to young men and women who have a genuine knowledge of the Lord. But the emphasis will be on having a good time, rather than on teaching.

Now, if this shocks you parents, well, I am sure you are entitled to be shocked. But our feeling is that this, as perhaps nothing else, will bear home to all of us that we have the responsibility for teaching our own children--not the church.

You know, Jesus did not say, "I will build my Sunday School" You will not find that anywhere in the New Testament! Of course I realize that when he said, "my church," this included the Sunday school. But the Sunday school, as an operation, is a Johnny-come-lately. The Sunday school began in the last century through the ministry of a man named Robert Raikes, of Gloucester, England, who was concerned about the little street waifs who had no one to tell them the good news about Jesus. So he started a Sunday school, because many of them had to work or attend school during weekdays. This was intended as an evangelistic endeavor, and was never intended to teach Christian children. He wanted to gather these little street urchins and tell them about the love of God. We have incorporated this into the church, and now we use it to train our children. But we Elders do not feel that this is right.

Now, there will be some teaching, because we realize that there are some children who come from non-Christian homes. By the way, we did a survey on this and found that only about six percent of the children in our Sunday school come from non-Christian homes. These children will have an opportunity to hear some teaching, and they will also be exposed to fine young Christian men and women. So there will be many opportunities for them to see and hear the gospel.

The second step is to begin to equip you and me, as parents, to teach our children. Beginning next Sunday, we are going to publish with each message a list of questions and helps that you can use in your own home to teach your children. Through the month of July I am going to continue to preach on Joshua. Throughout Israel there were a number of monuments and places which were intended to catch the attention of children. Next Sunday we will discover a little place called "Gilgal". Right where the nation of Israel arrived on the west bank of the Jordan river, they established a command post that they called Gilgal. The nearest English equivalent we have for that term today is "Roly-poly." I am sure that any child walking by that spot would say, "Why did they name that town 'Roly-poly'?" I was raised in Texas, and there was a town in West Texas named "Muleshoe". Every kid in the state wondered how in the world that place came to have that name. Well, there are a number of places like this located all over Palestine, and we are going to go through these in our study in the book of Joshua. You can go with your children on a journey through Palestine, and begin to teach them about some of these monuments. We will give you the material. And the pastoral staff, the elders, and the interns will all be available to help you with this

responsibility and privilege that you have as parents in your home.

Lord, thank you for our children, and for this opportunity to teach them and encourage them. All of us face a task like this with much uncertainty. But we thank you that you never call us to any task without providing adequate resources. So we rely upon you, and thank you for what you are going to teach our youngsters, and us, as a result of our faith, Amen.

---

Title: When Your Children Ask

By: David H. Roper

Series: What do these stones mean?

Scripture: Joshua 4:1-9, 15-22

Message No: 1 of 4

Catalog No. 3441

Updated September 8, 2000.

[PBC Home page](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [David H. Roper Library](#)

Copyright © 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

