

“CIRCUMCISE THE ISRAELITES AGAIN”

Joshua 5:1-15

Key Verse: 5:2

At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.”

Last week, we learned how important it is to have a sense of God’s history. Even before the crossing of the Jordan was completed, God told his people to set up a stone memorial to remind them of his power and grace. Joshua told his people: *“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 peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God”* (4:21-24).

In this chapter, God helps the Israelites to prepare themselves to conquer the promised land by ordering a circumcision as a sign of their commitment to God as his covenant people. They are also told to celebrate the Passover to remember the grace of God who had liberated them from their slavery in Egypt. God also encourages Joshua by sending his angel to meet with him. We learn that their preparations were spiritual, not military in nature. May God help us to be ready for our own spiritual battles!

I. “CIRCUMCISE THE ISRAELITES AGAIN” (1-9)

When the Canaanite kings heard that the Israelites crossed the Jordan, what was their response? Look at verse 1: *“Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all of the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until we had crossed over, their hearts melted and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.”* When the news of the Israelites’ crossing the Jordan reached the Canaanites, their hearts melted and they were gripped with fear. They heard how God had dried up the Jordan in flood stage so his people could cross it as on dry ground. The miracle sent a powerful message to all the Canaanites. Until now the Canaanites thought that the Jordan River was a natural defense line for them. Perhaps they had hoped that half of the Israelites would drown attempting to cross the swollen river. But God enabled the 1 million plus people and their animals to cross the river as on dry land. The previous news of their crossing of the Red Sea as on dry land was not a rumor after all. What else will their Mighty God do to Canaan? The hearts of the Canaanite kings melted with fear. They lost the courage to face the Israelites. The battles were won even before the Israelites fought the first battle against the Canaanites. This taught the Israelites that their real fight was a spiritual one—to depend on God and obey his commands. Likewise, our battle is a spiritual one. If we learn to depend on God only and obey his word faithfully, there is no enemy in this world that we cannot overcome.

How did God further help his people to be ready for their conquest of the promised land? Look at verses 2-3: *At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint*

knives and circumcise the Israelites again.” So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth. Why did God tell Joshua to circumcise the Israelites again at this particular time? Circumcision is cutting off the foreskin of a man’s private part. If a grown man is circumcised, he experiences a sharp pain and he is disabled for at least one week. Militarily speaking, such action just prior to an important battle did not make sense at all. With their crude surgical tools and lack of anti-biotic medicine, the whole country would be vulnerable to the enemy’s attack. They were camped in the enemy territory, just outside the city of Jericho. The circumcision would disable all males including the soldiers for several days. What a dangerous thing to do? In fact, this had already happened to the city of Shechem in Genesis 34. Then why did God command all the Israelites to have this painful ritual at this particular time?

We need to review the origin and spiritual significance of circumcision. The ritual of circumcision began when Abraham circumcised him, his son and servants in order to seal the covenant of God. God promised to bless Abraham to be a great nation through his numerous descendants and a vast land. Abraham accepted God’s calling by faith. But he stumbled many times in his faith. Then God wanted to seal the covenant between him and Abraham with the rite of circumcision. So Abraham circumcised himself and his household as the sign of the covenant (Ge 17:9-14, 23-27). This teaches us the important truth that Israel is a covenant nation. God has a special, covenant relationship with her. Other nations practiced circumcision and some still do, usually as a sign of young men entering adulthood, but only God gave it the spiritual meaning for the Israelites. The mark of the covenant reminded them that they belonged to God. It reminded them that they were a chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6). It reminded them that they should not use their bodies for sinful purposes or degrade them.

During the wilderness wandering the Israelites refused to believe God and enter the promised land (Dt 2:14; Nu 13-14). Instead, they wanted to go back to Egypt, their slavery life. So God suspended his covenant relationship with them temporarily, even though he was still merciful to them in many ways. Now God wanted to restore the covenant relationship with the new generation and told Joshua to circumcise the people to reaffirm the covenant relationship. They had to renew their commitment to God before conquering the promised land.

Circumcision is very painful. After circumcision, men cannot go to the bathroom freely, let alone fighting against enemy soldiers. For a week’s time they have to suffer from the pain of circumcision. Circumcision meant to consecrate oneself before God. Without having a right heart in the sight of God, no one can be victorious in his life. Furthermore, the Israelites had been in captivity in Egypt for 430 years, so it might be that they had lingering habits of slave mentality. Therefore, circumcision was necessary for them.

They had to be circumcised because all those who came out of Egypt--all the men of military age--died in the desert after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out of Egypt had been circumcised, but all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not. So most of the males who crossed the Jordan had not been circumcised. The Israelites who came out of Egypt did not obey God. So they were trained in the wilderness for 40 years. Not only that, they were not allowed to enter the promised land--the land flowing with milk and honey. The people of Israel who crossed

the Jordan were the new generation. We have to think about why they had to be circumcised just before they could engage in a fierce battle to conquer Jericho which was well-fortified. The people of Israel had never had battle or war experience. They were not really ready to fight and overcome the fortress of Jericho and conquer the whole land of Canaan. This is the reason God circumcised them: to have a right attitude in the sight of God.

So the cutting away the body part was meant to be the symbol of a spiritual operation on the heart—cutting away the compromising life. Deuteronomy 10:16 says: “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” No amount of physical surgery can change a person’s inner heart. Only when we repent our sins and turn to God, God changes our inner persons (Ro 2:25-29). Sadly, the practice of circumcision became only external thing for many Israelites. It became nothing more than a ritual. So Paul told the Jews, “... Circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Ro 2:29).

Again why did God tell them to be circumcised at this particular time? It was to help them totally depend on God. They had to have faith in God and obey God’s command to fight the battles ahead. God wanted them to claim the promised land by faith. He told them to be strong and courageous (1:6). But God made them weak first through the circumcision. They were made weak in their own strength so that they could be made strong in their faith in God. St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* In this way, God prepared the Israelites as soldiers of God at the critical time by circumcision. May God circumcise our hearts as he circumcised the Israelites!

So Joshua had the whole nation circumcised at Gilgal as was commanded by God. They remained where they were in camp until they were healed (8).

Look at verse 9: *Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.* What does it mean that the Lord rolled away the reproach of Egypt? The reproach of Egypt refers to the ridicule of the enemy when Israel failed to trust God at Kadesh Barnea. When Aaron made the golden calf at Mt. Sinai and the people broke the law of God, God wanted to destroy them all, and make a new nation from Moses. But Moses argued that God would lose glory if he did that, because the Egyptians would say that God delivered them in order to kill them (Ex 32:1-12). At Kadesh Moses used the same appeal when God said he would destroy Israel (Nu 14:11-14). Moses didn’t want the Egyptians to spread the word that the God of Israel couldn’t finish what he had started. Their sin in Kadesh Barnea was a reproach to them, but now it was all in the past. God rolled away the reproach in his grace and mercy.

God rolled away all the shame in the wilderness. In a sense it was a graduation ceremony in the promised land. They graduated from wondering wilderness life and were ready for conquering life in the promised land. In a similar fashion, God rolls away our shameful past when we are in Christ. Many of us had many shameful things in the past. In our life of sin we bore many shameful fruits which we do not really want to talk

about. However, by God's grace we have graduated from such a life of shame. God buried all the shameful past life through the blood of Jesus Christ. We have started the life of bearing fruit for God. This is what it means to be circumcised in the promised land.

II. CELEBRATING THE PASSOVER AT GILGAL (10-12)

Look at verse 10: *"On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover."* The Passover celebration was to remember God's deliverance from bondage in Egypt. It was to affirm their status as free people.

One evening on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. It was only the third time they celebrated the Passover after the exodus from Egypt. The last time they celebrated the Passover was 39 years earlier. So why did they celebrate the Passover at this time? It was to commemorate the grace of God who had set them free from their slavery life in Egypt. When Pharaoh refused to let his people go, Moses gave the ultimatum from God. All the firstborn males and animals were to be killed. But God told his people of a way of salvation. He told to kill one-year old lamb without blemish and smear the blood on their doorposts. When the angel of death saw the blood, it passed over the house, saving everyone inside the house. God had a great mercy on them and delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh. They needed this before commencing their conquest of the promised land. They needed to remember the saving grace of God in order to conquer the promised land.

In our Christian life, we must remember God's saving grace by the precious blood of Jesus. We are saved because the blood of Jesus covers us. Without remembering God's saving grace we cannot be thankful in our daily lives. Without God's mercy and Christ in our lives, we cannot be happy even if we have money or fame. We must remember our personal Passover. We must remember by the grace of God that we passed over from death to life. We must remember that we passed over from being a selfish person to be a blessing. A selfish person and a man called to be a blessing are quite different in their personal lives.

Look at verses 11-12: *"The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate of the produce of Canaan."* God had provided them food in the wilderness miraculously through the manna from heaven (Ex 16:14-31). Now that they were in the promised land with plentiful food, they did not need the manna any longer. They had to work hard now to prepare and harvest their food. They now could eat the delicious produce of the promised land. A Christian life is to learn the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." God who blesses us in poverty also trains us in plenty (Phil 4:11-12).

III. THE HOLY GROUND (13-15)

Look at verse 13: *"Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him*

and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” At this time Joshua was very tense. His way of thinking was somewhat horizontal. He thought that the man he met was either for the Israelites or their enemies. But there was one who was above this. It was God. Joshua met the commander of the army of the LORD.

Look at verses 14-15: “Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.” Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?” The commander of the LORD’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” Our God is great. Our God uses his people for his great purpose. However, God is not to be manipulated. We must honor God and serve him. What matters is that we must be on God’s side. During the Civil War the people of the North asserted that God was with them. The people of the South claimed that God was with them. Abraham Lincoln, however, said, “God is neither on the side of the North nor on the side of the South. Probably, God is working out a lot greater purpose than we can ever imagine.” Abraham Lincoln understood the greatness of God.

When the angel told him that he was the command of the Lord’s army, Joshua asked if he had any message for him from God. Perhaps Joshua expected some advice on military strategy. But what did the angel of the Lord say to Joshua? He replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.”

When Joshua thought about fighting against the strong Canaanite nations, he felt apprehensive about the upcoming battle. So God sent the Commander of the Lord’s army and told Joshua, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” This was the message that God want to give Joshua. And Joshua understood the message of God loud and clear. The same thing had happened to Moses. When God wanted to send Moses to deliver his people from the hand of Pharaoh, Moses didn’t think he was qualified to do the job. He had been living in a no-man’s land for 40 years, taking care of the dumb sheep, day in and day out. He thought the land where he lived was a cursed land. But God told him, “Take off your sandals. The place where you stand is holy ground.” We must also realize that where we stand is holy ground, because God is with us and he wants us to carry out our holy mission. From God’s point of view, America is holy ground. God is present among us. He wants to make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In today’s passage, we learn that God wants us to be spiritually prepared for our spiritual battles. The Israelites in Gilgal had to circumcise their young men, that is, they had to make a commitment to God as his covenant people, and celebrate the Passover, that is, commemorate God’s grace that liberated them from their slavery in Egypt. God also sent an angel to meet with Joshua so that he might realize that he was standing on holy ground. They had to prepare themselves before conquering the first city in the promised land by making a commitment to God. It was spiritual preparations, not military. Likewise, we can get ready for our spiritual battles by remembering the grace of God who set us free from our bondage to sin and death and by making a commitment to God newly. May God help us to fight a good spiritual fight to claim our promised land!