

## “Because They Did Not Obey the Lord”

*The seventy-fifth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Joshua 5:1-12; Acts 2:42-47**

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**A**fter forty years of wandering through the wilderness, the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered the land of Canaan. At Joshua’s command, the priests carried the ark of the covenant to the edge of the river. The moment their feet touched the water, the Jordan River miraculously stopped flowing. And then the entire nation of Israel—many hundreds of thousands people and all their possessions and animals—crossed the river on dry ground. The covenant promise God made to Abraham some four hundred years earlier—in which God promised to give his people this good land flowing with milk and honey—was now a reality. At long last, Israel was a great nation, across the river in the promised land, and ready to take the fortified city of Jericho which blocked their entrance into the rest of Canaan. It will not be long before Israel will take possession of all the land that God had promised them as the Canaanites just melt away before them. God had promised this would be the case and God always keeps his promises.

As we continue our series on the Book of Joshua, we now find the Israelites safely across the Jordan River, camped at Gilgal, just a few miles to the west of Jericho. It was here at Gilgal that YHWH commanded the people of Israel to build a memorial to this great event, using twelve stones taken from the very spot in the river bed where the priests had set their feet on dry ground. This monument will be the means by which future generations of Israelites are reminded of that glorious day when YHWH dried up the Jordan and his people entered Canaan to receive their promised inheritance. The crossing of the Jordan was a graphic sign to Israel that YHWH keeps his covenant promise. It was also a powerful warning to Israel’s enemies that YHWH is Israel’s shield and protector and that he will ensure that Israel will possess the land of Canaan.

**W**ith the people of Israel now safely across the river, in chapter 5 Joshua sets the stage for Israel’s future conquest of Canaan, beginning with the fall of Jericho as recounted in chapter 6.

Verse 1 of Joshua 5 is a summary of sorts, recounting the events of chapters 3-4. *“As soon as all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel.”* While this verse is a summation about Israel miraculously crossing the river, the verse also offers an explanation for what is soon to come, the conquest of all of Canaan. The reason why the Israelites will be able to defeat the Canaanites so rapidly will have far more to do with YHWH’s power and Israel’s obedience to the terms of the covenant, than it does with Israel’s 40,000 soldiers. This is what the people of Israel must recognize as they prepare to take possession of the land. They will be victorious only so long as they are faithful to YHWH.

Throughout this series “I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People,” we have focused on God’s covenant promises, especially those tied to the covenant of grace made with Adam after the fall of the human race, and then most fully realized in the covenant God made with Abraham described in Genesis 15. But as part of God’s covenant promise to give Israel the land of Canaan, God promised to make Israel a great nation. With the crossing of the Jordan, that promise is now a reality. The people of Canaan knew all about the fact that Israel escaped from Egypt and the clutches of the mighty Pharaoh by

passing through the Red Sea. They had heard all about Israel's defeat of the kings Amalek, Sihon and Og and their armies. As reported by Rahab to the spies (Joshua 2), the people living in Canaan knew full-well that the land on which they lived had been promised by YHWH to his people.

The Canaanites also knew all about YHWH's great power and devotion to Israel. They had known of it since the days of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael—the latter being the ancestor of many of those now living in Canaan. And now with a string of impressive military victories and with God repeating the miracle of the Red Sea at the Jordan River, the people of Canaan were terrified at the news of Israel's advance. Instead of organizing a defense, the fierce Canaanites just melt away. The text says that because of their fear of YHWH, the people no longer had the spirit (will) to resist. There are battles yet to be fought, but the Canaanites are completely dispirited. Israel is indeed a great nation and the Canaanites are terrified.

Therefore, the critical point of this section of Joshua (chapter five and the events preceding the fall of Jericho) is that despite having 40,000 soldiers and a growing reputation as a military power, at this point in their history, the people of Israel are obedient to Joshua's command that they be consecrated to the Lord. Instead of reading about the army of Israel preparing for war, we read of the people of Israel being faithful to the covenant and trusting in YHWH to give them the victory over their enemies.<sup>1</sup> Not only did the people abstain from sexual relations and wash their garments, they built the monument at Gilgal just as YHWH commanded. The reason why Israel has become such a great nation and why the Canaanites are so afraid of them is because YHWH is leading them. They see the ark of the covenant (the symbolic presence of God) at the front of the Israeli column. YHWH is Israel's God and they are his people—the very essence of the covenant promise. This is why victory over the Canaanites is certain.

Clearly, this obedience is the fruit of the covenant relationship established between YHWH and Israel at Mount Sinai in which God promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. At this point in Israel's history, the people have just witnessed a great miracle when they crossed through the Jordan. They are in awe of Joshua, their covenant mediator. They do all the things God has commanded and this assures them of victory. It is a rare but shining moment in redemptive history. Israel is obedient to the Lord. But given human sinfulness, this obedience will not last and Israel will fall deeply into sin.

**A**nd so having consecrated themselves to the Lord, having crossed the river, and having built the monument the Lord commanded, it was now time for the men of Israel to be circumcised in obedience to the covenant of grace which God had made with Abraham before.

It comes as a bit of a surprise, but during Israel's forty years in the wilderness the covenant sign and seal of circumcision had not been applied to male Israelites. This is especially perplexing since Exodus 4:24-26 includes the account of Moses being threatened with the supreme sanction (death) by YHWH because Moses had not circumcised his own sons. For reasons unknown, Moses did not command the circumcision of male Israelites during the forty years in the wilderness. But now that Israel was in Canaan and preparing to occupy the entire land, the people were greatly devoted to the Lord and to the covenant—a situation much unlike the conduct of that generation which had died in the wilderness. Before this current generation enters Canaan, all the males will be circumcised.

The explanation for this unique set of circumstances is given by Joshua in verses 2-7, "*At that time the LORD said to Joshua, 'Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.'* So Joshua

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 144.

*made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way.”*

There are a number of important points made here. For one thing, when the LORD commanded Joshua to do this, Joshua did so, and the people of Israel willingly complied. There was no complaint, only compliance. I don't want to be too graphic here, but given the nature of the procedure (with a flint knife), this was not something people undertook lightly. The fact that this was done “a second time” probably refers to the fact that all the men of Israel were circumcised when they left Egypt, but the practice had inextricably stopped during the journey through the wilderness. The practice of circumcision had to be instituted a “second time.”

Circumcision was not the sign and seal of the Sinaitic covenant—a key issue raised by Paul in his letter to the Galatians against the Judaizers, who saw circumcision as a meritorious act—but circumcision was the sign and seal of the covenant of grace God made with Abraham. To be circumcised, then, was to belong to the people of God. To be circumcised identified someone with the covenant promise that God would provide a redeemer who would save his people from their sin, that Israel would be a great nation, that God's people would possess the land of promise, with the latter pointing beyond Canaan to that heavenly city whose builder and architect is the Lord. This means that the prosperity of Israel while in Canaan, was actually a graphic picture of those heavenly blessings which are beyond our comprehension.

In verse 2 of Joshua 5, we learn that the place where this mass circumcision took place was called “Gibeath-haaraloth,” which literally means “mountain of foreskins.”<sup>2</sup> In light of this mass circumcision that took place here, this became the nickname for Gilgal where Israel was camped when renewal of the covenant took place. We miss the significance of this undertaking, if we don't consider the sheer number of men and boys involved, probably well into the hundreds of thousands. But if the people of Israel were to be consecrated to the Lord and then possess the land, and if they were going to honor the terms of the covenant of grace God made with Abraham, then this mass circumcision was a necessity. This was the sign and seal of the covenant that God made with Abraham, to whom, God promised this land. Israel must ratify the covenant before they take possession of their inheritance.

In verses 4-7, Joshua has spelled out the historical circumstances which led to Israel's neglect of the sign and seal of the covenant, especially in light of Israel's current zeal to be faithful to the covenant. Once the Exodus from Egypt began, for some reason, the practice of circumcision ceased. It is implied here by Joshua that this failure to embrace the sign and seal of the covenant was yet another sad indication of the general unbelief among that generation which came out of Egypt. These were the people who danced around the golden calf while Moses was being given the law up on the mountain. These were the people who constantly complained to Moses and grumbled about his leadership, some of whom even

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<sup>2</sup> Howard, Joshua, 149.

participated in a rebellion against Moses at the behest of Korah. This was the same generation which doubted God's ability to give them the land of promise when the spies reported that the Canaanites were numerous and fierce. And this was the generation which because of their unbelief, were sentenced to wander throughout the wilderness for forty years, all the while neglecting the sign and seal of the covenant. The point is that this generation of Israelites now entering Canaan is not like the previous generation. These men will obey. These men will undergo circumcision and renew the covenant.

In verse 8, Joshua recounts the painful consequences of these many circumcisions. "*When the circumcising of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.*" Circumcision with a flint knife would hurt. The men of Israel were not going to be marching on Jericho until they had a few days to heal. They would be vulnerable to attack during this time, and must be protected by God, who created fear in the heart of all the Canaanites. But while it is easy to smile at Joshua's account and thank God for things like novocaine and Advil, the theological circumstances of this are very significant.

In verse 9 we read, "*And the LORD said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.*" The disobedience of that generation which left Egypt, no longer characterizes this generation which has entered Canaan. That generation was not allowed to enter this good land, but this generation was. The name Gilgal is similar to the Hebrew word "to roll" and is probably some form of word play indicating this change in Israel's spiritual zeal.<sup>3</sup> Israel's shame (and unbelief) was now a thing of the past. Because the people had been obedient to the covenant and believed God's promise, God would fight for Israel.<sup>4</sup> What is more, he would ensure that his people not only possess the land of promise, but that they will enjoy it.

**W**hile the men of Israel were still recovering from this mass circumcision, the time came for the annual celebration of the Passover as recounted in verses 10-12. Given the fact that Israel was at a major turning point in its history, this celebration of the Passover would likewise be different from all others. Not only does this Passover celebration tie the current generation to the promise God made to their fathers, it also marks the transition from the wilderness to Canaan.

According to Joshua in verse 10, "*While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho.*" The date given here goes back to the reference in Joshua 4:19. "*The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho.*" And so after being in Canaan for four days, the Israelites celebrate their first Passover in the land of promise. Joshua's point is that the people are obedient to God's commands and celebrating the Passover in the promised land exactly as God commanded Israel to do, and this despite the pain currently experienced by all Israeli males! This is not only a similar circumstance to the celebration of the first Passover after Israel crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground, but in this case, the crossing of the Jordan and the undergoing of circumcision were acts by which the people of Israel prepared themselves for this particular Passover, in which it becomes clear that the promises God made to Israel when they left Egypt and crossed through

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<sup>3</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Hess, *Joshua*, 122.

the sea, have finally come to fruition in this generation of Israelites now camped safely in Canaan.<sup>5</sup> God promised this wonderful blessing to their fathers. And now God has made good on his promise. This is that generation which receives these good things from the hand of God.

Despite the continuity between the promises God made to Israel upon leaving Israel and this next generation which was now receiving them, one thing central to the life of Israel is about to change forever, and this will cause great rejoicing among the people. Joshua tells us in verses 11-12 how this came to pass. *“And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of the land. And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.”* No longer would the Israelites eat manna. They have entered a good land flowing with milk and honey, a bountiful land where, unlike the wilderness, there was plenty to eat. More importantly, Canaanite grains and fruit didn’t taste like the manna they had been eating every day for the last forty years. The people are in the land to enjoy its bounty. They are not mere tourists. This bounty is now theirs to enjoy. And they do so.

The prior generation which died in the wilderness chafed and grumbled about eating the manna, which was the symbol of God’s faithfulness in providing for every need for his people. While God was faithful to Israel and his people should have been thankful for God’s gracious provision, instead they grumbled and complained about the food which God provided. All that would change. Now that the people were finally in Canaan, the manna ceased. Not only would the people be able to eat from the abundance in Canaan—a huge blessing, and one which is easy to overlook—but the cessation of the manna was yet another concrete and vivid sign yet that Israel has now entered a new period in redemptive history. The wilderness journey is finally over. The great significance of this can be seen in the fact that Joshua repeats this point several times.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the Israelites now eat the produce of the land not only indicates that the wilderness phase of their history is over, but perhaps more than anything else, this is the sign that the conquest of the land is already under way. This is food which the Canaanites have planted and tended in land which they knew was not their own. Therefore, when the people of Israel eat the produce around them, they see that God has fulfilled his promise to give them the land. They can taste and eat and see that the Lord is good. And although nothing is said of this by Joshua, we can just imagine the great joy experienced by the Israelites during those days when they eat their fill—and it was not manna!

**W**hile Joshua describes one of the few moments in the history of Israel in which the people were faithful and obedient to the covenant, if nothing else, this vignette from Israel’s history reminds us of the importance of the sacraments as signs and seals of that covenant which God makes with his people.

We must not overlook the fact that once YHWH led the people of Israel cross the river on dry ground, only then did the people of Israel renew the covenant (the mass circumcision) and celebrate their first Passover in the land of promise. In both cases, these Old Testament sacraments are the sign and seal of that covenant of grace which God makes with his people and which the people ratify through their

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<sup>5</sup> Hess, *Joshua*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 154.

obedient observance. These signs (especially the Passover) point ahead to and prepare the people for their coming redeemer, Jesus Christ. While circumcision renders one a member of the covenant and is the sign and seal of the covenant of grace and thereby entitled to all its benefits and subject to all covenant responsibilities, it is not some magical act which effects regeneration and ensures that one is numbered among the elect. Like any other sacrament, the efficacy of circumcision is tied to faith in the promise, and is subject to abuse, one form of which we see in our current passage—neglect.

The people of Israel wandered through the wilderness for forty years without the men being circumcised. This generation which largely perished in the wilderness was clearly indifferent to the sign and seal of the covenant. This is but another indication that this generation was characterized by unbelief. This is why it is so puzzling to me that many Christians who profess faith in Christ are absolutely indifferent to the sign and seal of the new covenant, which is baptism. Just as it was a sign of indifference to the covenant when the Israelites neglected circumcision, so too it is a sign of indifference to the covenant when professing Christians neglect baptism today. This becomes clear in Acts 2:38-39 upon the conclusion of Peter's Pentecost sermon: *"And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."* How do people respond to the gospel when it was first preached to them? They trust Christ, repent of their sins, and present themselves and their families for baptism ("the promise is for you and for your children"), just as we have witnessed this very day.

And then in verses 42-47 (our New Testament lesson) Luke describes what lay at the heart of the apostolic church. *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."* The joyful conditions of a heart-felt faith at the time of the birth of the church are remarkably like those depicted in Joshua 5, where the people of God enjoy his bounty, and willingly obey his word, which includes the submission to circumcision and the celebration of the Passover, just as the apostolic church baptized all those and their families who embraced the gospel, and who then devoted themselves to the preached word and the Lord's Supper.

The sacraments are given to us by God because we are weak and in need of constant reminders of God's faithfulness to his promise. As the gospel creates faith, the sacraments strengthen that faith. In baptism, we become members of the covenant community which is Christ's church. Baptism marks us and our children off from unbelievers. It is the sign that we are Christ's, that he is our shield and defender. Through the Lord's Supper our souls are fed and nourished so that what is promised to us in the gospel—that Christ's death is sufficient for all our sins and his righteousness is imputed to us through faith—is signed and sealed unto us as we take and eat. Let it not be said of us that "they did not obey the Lord," as it was said of that generation of Israelites who perished in the wilderness. Rather, let it be said of us that we trusted God's promise and we believed the gospel with all our hearts. Let the Canaanites around us see that we present ourselves and our children unto the Lord through baptism. Let them see that each week we taste and see that the Lord is good when we come to the Lord's Supper.

Let them see and know that YHWH is our shield and protector, because Jesus Christ is our Lord who gives us every good thing, including life eternal. Amen!