

Receiving Your Inheritance

Messages from the Book of Joshua

Message 5

Spiritual Preparation

Joshua 5:1-15

Introduction

Israel was home! Finally. Most of these Israelites had never known a true home. Everyone but Joshua and Caleb have spent their entire adult lives wandering in the desert, and those who remember Egypt have bitter memories of toil and oppression. But now, over 600 years after Abraham left his comfortable home in Mesopotamia to receive a new home from God, his descendants have arrived. They crossed the Jordan River and are camped in the land of Canaan, but the danger is just beginning. Canaan is occupied by Amorites, Perizzites, and several other nations, and they will have to be dealt with before Israel can settle there.

The Danger of Obedience

Actually, Israel is in a precarious position. They would have been an easy target, with all the families and livestock milling around and the army not yet mobilized. Invasions are tough. Remember the invasion of Normandy in *Saving Private Ryan*? Thousands of lives were lost in a few hours as the allies swarmed onto Omaha beach and secured their positions. And of course, who wouldn't try to beat back an invading force before it gets a foothold? Any defender would be idiotic to pass up such an opportunity. Those first few days across the Jordan were pivotal in determining the outcome of the war, and Israel's first priority was to get ready to face the enemy.

So what did Israel do? Israel did not secure her position, or mobilize her forces – she engaged in a religious ceremony! And it was not just any old ceremony, but one which would totally immobilize every man in the nation. Circumcision is cutting back the foreskin of the penis. It is very painful and keeps you off your feet for several days. There is a gruesome story in Genesis about a young Canaanite man named Shechem. He fell in love with Dinah, Jacob's daughter and fornicated with her. In spite of this, Shechem actually loved Dinah and wanted to marry her. I get the impression that she liked him, too. But her brothers were furious that Shechem had defiled her. So they devised a cruel plan. They said that the only way they would agree to a marriage was if Shechem and his city would become circumcised. Shechem was so in love with Dinah, he agreed to this and every man in his city was circumcised. Then when they were recovering and in too much pain to stand Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, entered the city and slaughtered every man. It would be equivalent to using baptism as a pretext for drowning someone you hate. The extreme pain and vulnerability and pain of circumcision was an occasion for one of the darkest blots on the history of God's people.

Is Israel out of her mind?! It was dangerous enough to enter enemy territory. It was crazy to bring along the families and livestock. Now the whole nation is laid out, helpless. A few dozen children could have wiped them out! What is going on here? Again, the issue is obedience to God. It was God's idea to do this. God is the one who commanded them to be circumcised. And God is the one who waited until they were across the Jordan to issue the command. Has God lost His mind?

I hope you don't think I am being irreverent for raising this question. In fact, we all ask this question at one time or another. You have been in situations where God demanded something ridiculous. Perhaps it was obeying your parents when they required something outrageous. Perhaps your professor or boss gave

you a long, tedious, and pointless assignment. Perhaps you have worked real hard to develop friendships with some unbelievers, and faithfulness to God forced you to offend them, like refusing to see a rotten movie or not joining them in telling mean jokes. Maybe you are struggling to keep your grades up, and God keeps bringing people to you who need your help. Some of you here are going to feel panic on Friday. This is our retreat weekend, and at the last minute you are going to think you cannot possibly survive a whole weekend away. You feel exposed, helpless, perhaps even betrayed. Like Israel. They followed God all the long years in the desert. They crossed the Jordan against all common sense. And how does God reward them for their faithfulness? By demanding something stupid! Do you get angry with God in times like this? Come on, admit it if it's true. I think everyone gets angry with God at some point. I have. Moses did. Peter did. Jonah did. The list goes on and on. God can be infuriating.

Why does God do this? Why does He aggravate us so? Does He take pleasure in making us squirm, or is He forgetful and suddenly remember things at inopportune times? Well, it doesn't have to be so, and I am not talking about God's behavior. Did you notice that in spite of the very serious implications of the circumcision, none of the Israelites complained? Why? Why do they happily do all God commands? Isn't it what we have seen in every chapter so far? Israel has faith in God. They believe in Him, and trust Him to take care of them. This is always the issue, isn't it? Isn't our struggle always the question of whether God will come through for us? The dangers are real. You might lose your friends. Your grade might take a hit. Your parents and professors might get angry. All these things could happen, and sometimes they do happen to Christians. But the issue is whether God is good, whether He has our best interests at heart, and whether He has the power to take care of us. What do you think? Can you trust Him with *every* aspect of your life? Do you trust Him *completely*?

Some people think that faith is a leap into the unknown – a willingness to believe something against the evidence. But this is not faith, not the faith we see in the Bible. Faith is trust in the unknown, but is always based on real facts. You are not supposed to trust God to care for you without any evidence. Biblical faith is trust based on the facts of what God has done. That is why the Bible is so crucial to belief. Without a growing knowledge of the Bible your faith becomes shallow, flimsy, unable to carry through tough times. In the Bible God proves His trustworthiness. Preeminently God proves His faithfulness by sending Christ to live among us and die for us. As Paul said, if God was willing to send Christ to die for us, does it make any sense that He will abandon us? Does it? Of course not! And the Bible is full of stories of men and women who suffered greatly, but were never abandoned by God. These stories of people like you and me remind us that God will always go with us, too.

We do not know how much Israel knew about the conditions in Canaan. The spies who infiltrated Jericho reported back that the people of that city were afraid of Israel, but Israel was probably unaware of how deep and widespread that feeling was. God had taken care of them thus far, and they trusted Him to take care of them still. Now, looking back, we can see that God did this by immobilizing the surrounding nations with terror. The text says that “their heart melted”, and “there was no spirit in them”. They were paralyzed with fear. They locked their city gates, barred their doors, and never set foot outside their houses. So how much of a threat were they to the circumcised Israelites? God completely removed them from the picture.

You do not know how God will carry you through difficulties. You may never know. But you have ample evidence to trust Him with your whole life. Anything less is foolish.

Circumcision

This whole discussion so far has been prompted because the Israelites were circumcised. This

passage seems to assume that circumcision was important, but that issue is not addressed directly here. Of course it *had* to be important. Why else would God command it? Especially since it is such a painful and vulnerable experience?

We live in a day in which rituals are devalued, especially religious rituals, most especially among Christians. The prevailing attitude among Christians is that what matters most is love for God, and everything else is more or less optional. For example, if you go to a typical Christian bookstore, you will find many devotional books, but few on theology or liturgy. Now I heartily agree that loving God is the most important aspect of our faith, but there is much more to loving God than warm feelings about Him. The Old Testament has a lot to say about loving God, too – but did you notice that the focus in Joshua has been on faith and obedience? And who can dispute that the ritual of circumcision is the central issue in this chapter?

Without going into great detail, we need to review why circumcision is so important. If you turn back to Genesis chapter 17, we will find the origin and significance of circumcision. Let's read the first 14 verses.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

This was not the first time God spoke to Abraham. Abraham heard from God 24 years before. But now, after 24 years of faithfully following God, God renewed His promise to Abraham. The land of Canaan will be his home. Abraham will produce a great nation and be a blessing to the whole world. And now God gives Abraham a sign that this will surely take place.

Notice that God calls His promise a "covenant". A covenant is a formal promise, like a treaty. In fact God's covenants are very much like the treaties that were used by the ancient near eastern kings to conclude war and keep the peace. A covenant always had a sign that sealed, or formalized and reminded the parties of the covenant. Remember when God promised Noah He would never again destroy the earth? He provided the rainbow as a sign of this promise. In Abraham's case, circumcision is the sign of God's covenant with him. But in order for Abraham to receive the promise, he must be faithful to God's command.

He must be circumcised, as well as every male in his household. If anyone refused, they would be cut off, which is disowned and disinherited. The person who was cut off was not killed or persecuted, but they were prohibited from joining in the worship of God, and would not receive an inheritance. So you see, circumcision is vitally important to Abraham's children. Without it they would lose the promise of a new home in Canaan. Without it they would be considered unfaithful to God and unworthy of His promise.

Now some people look at religious ceremonies only for what they can get from them. They would value circumcision for its ability to remind the people of God's goodness. In a similar manner, today many people look at baptism simply as a reminder of our relationship to God. But that overlooks a very significant and powerful aspect to God's signs. And that is their role in reminding *God* of the covenant. Take the rainbow, for example. The rainbow reminds us of God's promise. But it is very interesting that the reason given for the rainbow is not to remind us, but to remind *God*! In Genesis 9:16 God said, "*The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.*" One of the functions of God's signs is to remind Him of His promises. Of course it's not that God actually forgets, but that He desires that sign to be present.

We Americans tend to disparage the role and importance of signs and symbols, yet even here, after the attack last September, many Americans eagerly flew our flag as a sign of pride in our country. But signs are vitally important to God, and circumcision was perhaps the most important in the Old Testament. The most striking illustration of this happened when Moses was on the way to Egypt. God Had met with him at the burning bush and appointed him to return to Egypt and lead the people out of slavery. Moses was God's man on God's mission. Clearly he was not a bad guy. But on the way, God met him and tried to kill his son. There was a fierce struggle in the middle of the night, and Moses' wife saved the day (or night!). How? By circumcising her son! What a bizarre incident! There is a lot there that I don't fully understand, but what is unmistakably clear is that God means business with His signs!

Now let's come back to Joshua and the children of Israel. Why was God so fixated on circumcision? Because it was a sign of the covenant between God and His people. In a sense it was like a contract. To oversimplify a bit, without a contract, there is no responsibility. Very shortly things are going to get very rough. People are going to get killed, tempers will flare, patience will wear thin. Eventually someone will say, "Why the heck are we doing this, anyway?" Circumcision was the sign that there was a promise between God and His people. Israel will obey, and God will protect.

Circumcision reminded the Israelites of God's promise, but that is not the most significant reason for performing circumcision right here. There was something about the wilderness. The wilderness was a godless place. For some reason we don't fully understand, the people did not circumcise their babies while they were wandering in the wilderness. Perhaps it was because they were there due to rebellion against God. But now they were entering a new land, the promised land, a land God had prepared for them. This was God's land. Eventually it would be called the "Holy Land". They were on a religious mission to destroy the defilers of God's land, and to do so, they needed to be holy themselves. Now holiness usually refers to moral purity, but it also refers to separation. You see, this land was going to be separated from all the other lands on earth to demonstrate God's goodness. And the people who lived there needed to be separated as well. God was going into Canaan to destroy the wicked, but before his wrath let loose, He would mark all those who belonged to Him. Israel was circumcised here to protect them from God when He went to war.

All this is not just a bunch of theological mumbo-jumbo or tired history. Just as circumcision was the identifying mark of believers in the Old Covenant, so baptism is the identifying mark of believers in the New Covenant. And just as the one who was not circumcised would be cut off from Israel, so he who is not baptized is cut off from Christ. There are exceptions, of course, but for all ordinary people in ordinary

circumstances, baptism is the sign which links us with Christ. It is necessary

C. David Green
Lehigh University
February 19, 2002