

## Joshua 5:1-12

### Rites and Ceremonies

#### **Review and Introduction**

We return again, this Easter morning, to our study of Joshua. I freely admit that our passage today might seem a bit pedestrian, a bit, mundane and uneventful, especially after the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River last time, but since we all know that *all Scripture* is written for our edification, I believe that we can dive into this brief passage today with enthusiasm and expectation that God has something for us in it.

To remind us where we are in the narrative, we can summarize the first four chapters of the book of Joshua as follows. Chapters 1 and 2 served as the prologue. The first chapter gave us insights into the Israelite encampment as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Chapter 2 did the same for the Canaanites, with special attention to Rahab and her confession of faith. Chapters 3 and 4 saw the people cross the Jordan River in a miracle reminiscent of Moses leading the people across the parted sea.

Now, in the next section of Joshua, particularly in chapters 5-8 the narrative turns our attention to the beginnings of the conquest of the Promised Land. But while there is plenty of war and conquest ahead, the passage in chapter five that we will enjoy this morning is concerned with spiritual preparations rather than military ones. This is in keeping with one of the primary themes of Joshua, which is that it is the Lord Who will give the Israelites the land, their task was to be strong and courageous in obeying the Lord's commands.

So as we see the Israelites performing certain rites and ceremonies as they prepare to follow the Lord's commands to conquer the land, let us appreciate that these are not merely archaic and ancient rituals that have little relevance for today. Instead, let us acknowledge that such spiritual preparation is essential to living a life of obedience. Such preparation, different though it may be today for us, is the means by which we bow low before God, submit to His will, and center ourselves in His perfect will.

#### **The Fear of the Canaanites**

Our account begins, "Now it came about when 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 how the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the sons of Israel until they had crossed, that their hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the sons of Israel" (v. 1). To

begin, we can understand that the reference to the Amorites and Canaanites is not intended to limit the concerns of the inhabitants of Canaan only to those two people groups. In this instance, the terms serve to represent all the groups that inhabited the land, as indicated by the use of the word *all*.

We can also see that this is a very straightforward claim, one that echoes what we have heard previously in chapter two, about the state of things in the land that lay before the Israelites. Remember Rahab's confession of faith.

"<sup>10</sup>For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. <sup>11</sup>When we heard these reports, our hearts melted and no courage remained in anyone any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below (Joshua 2:10-11).

So, as the rulers of the land in Canaan received reports from their scouts that the Israelites had, in fact, crossed the impassable Jordan River, and crossed it in miraculous fashion - the Lord having "dried up the waters" - they finally realized that their cause was desperate.

This fear also helps explain why the Canaanites did not immediately attack the Israelites after the Jordan River crossing. Surely, the Israelites would have been vulnerable as they were setting up camp and organizing the two million souls who certainly needed to be sorted and made comfortable. The Canaanites were simply too afraid of the Lord to attack His people. This fear also allowed for the rite of circumcision to be performed, since the Israelites would be even more vulnerable during their recovery.

And without spoiling the narrative, we can also see that the fear of the Canaanites explains why the attacks against Jericho and later Ai went unopposed. We know that God works in the hearts of His people to bring about His will. But it is equally true that He works in the hearts of those who are not His children to bring about His will as well. Kings may think they are sovereign, but it is the Lord Who truly rules on heaven and on earth.

"The mind of a person plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps" Proverbs 16:9

### **The Rite of Circumcision Performed**

The Israelites knew of this fear in the hearts of their adversaries, remembering that Rahab had spoken of it. So with the confidence that they had time to be left undisturbed, the Lord told Joshua to perform a rite that had been ignored for an entire generation. "<sup>2</sup>At that time the LORD

said to Joshua, 'Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time.' <sup>3</sup>So Joshua made himself flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth" (v. 2-4).

First, it is worth noting that the language of the verse shows that the same word is used for God's command and Joshua's obedient response. The Lord said, and Joshua obeyed. There was no delay. There were no questions asked. We ought to appreciate, and try to cultivate in ourselves, such submission to the clear commands of God.

Circumcision may seem a curious religious rite, but there is no underestimating its importance to the people of Israel. It was introduced by the Lord, Himself, to Abraham. The account is recorded in Genesis 17. After changing his name from Abram to Abraham, and reminding him that he would be a father of a multitude of nations, the Lord said,

"<sup>9</sup>Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup>This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup>And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, including a slave who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. <sup>13</sup>A slave who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall certainly be circumcised; so My covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup>But as for an uncircumcised male, one who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant" (Genesis 17:9-14).

See the repetition God used to reinforce His insistence that this command was not to be ignored. Circumcision served as *the* sign of the covenant with God. It was to be kept by Abraham and all his male descendants without exception. It was to be performed on a particular day after birth. It was to be performed on any foreigner who joined the Israelites. It was to be performed on any slave purchased by an Israelite. It was simply not possible to remain uncircumcised and be in a covenant relationship with the Lord of Israel.

But this raises the obvious question of, if circumcision was so fundamentally important to being in a covenant relationship with God, then why had these men never been circumcised? While Scripture makes it clear that those born in the desert had not yet been circumcised, it does not tell us why. But it is important to point out that the command to "circumcise again the sons of Israel

the second time" (v. 2), does not mean that these men had been circumcised, and the procedure was to be repeated. The word translated "second time" is better understood to mean "to return" or "to turn back."

In other words, this was a command in reference to the previous rite of circumcision. The people of Israel had been out of favor with God (though He still provided for them) during their wanderings in the wilderness. They had sinned against Him by their faithlessness in not entering the Promised Land forty years before. Therefore, the command to Joshua was not to circumcise these men again, but to renew the rite of circumcision, and thus restore the people to the Lord.

The historical detail of the use of flint knives is also worth considering. This is a reference to the volcanic glass, obsidian. Obsidian fractures easily, and can be formed into a smooth and sharp surface which would be ideal for performing the ritual. Many other cultures used obsidian knives in their own rituals, including circumcision. Finally, the location of Gibeath-haaraloth - a name that means "hill of the foreskins" - is simply the same place as Gilgal (v. 9), but with a different name.

### **The Reason of Circumcision Explained**

The command to circumcise the Israelites is given, and obeyed, in a very straightforward fashion, but the explanation of why circumcision was required gives us greater detail into its significance.

<sup>4</sup>"This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness along the way after they came out of Egypt. <sup>5</sup>For all the people who came out were circumcised, but all the people who were born in the wilderness along the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised. <sup>6</sup>For the sons of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, that is, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished because they did not listen to the voice of the LORD, to whom the LORD had sworn that He would not let them see the land which the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give us\*, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>7</sup>So their children whom He raised up in their place, Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them along the way. <sup>8</sup>Now when they had finished circumcising all the nation, they remained in their places in the camp until they recovered. <sup>9</sup>Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the shame of Egypt from you." So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day" (v. 4-9).

We see in this passage a contrast of the people past and present, with an emphasis on the national unity of Israel. Indeed, the word translated 'all' is used no less than six times in these six verses. To go through the passage quickly, Scripture states that not one among those who originally

participated in the exodus had survived. Specific concern is the men of war, that is, those men old enough to bear arms in battle. So younger boys were exempt. So, too, were Joshua and Caleb, since they had been in favor of trusting God and entering the land. But with those exceptions, it is clear that "all the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness" (v. 4).

Not only had all of the people died, but "all the people who came out were circumcised" (v. 5). No uncircumcised men had passed through the Red Sea. None had stood at Mount Sinai. Every male who had participated in the exodus had been circumcised, and everyone who had participated in the exodus had died. Now, there was to be a renewal of that rite, and that same unity among the people must be true. With this new generation, all males of age must participate in the rite of circumcision.

And Scripture spares no blame for reminding the Israelites why they had suffered so in the wilderness. That generation "perished because they did not listen to the voice of the LORD" (v. 6). The forty years of wandering was God's judgment for their unbelief. The details are given in the book of Numbers. God declared, and we can almost hear His wrath in the words recorded,

<sup>29</sup>"Your dead bodies will fall in this wilderness, all your numbered men according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me. <sup>30</sup>By no means will you come into the land where I swore to settle you, except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. <sup>31</sup>Your children, however, whom you said would become plunder - I will bring them in, and they will know the land which you have rejected. <sup>32</sup>But as for you, your dead bodies will fall in this wilderness. <sup>33</sup>Also, your sons will be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and they will suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your bodies perish in the wilderness. <sup>34</sup>In accordance with the number of days that you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall suffer the punishment for your guilt a year, that is, forty years, and you will know My opposition. <sup>35</sup>I, the LORD, have spoken, I certainly will do this to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. They shall be worn out in this wilderness, and there they shall die" (Numbers 14:29-35).

Terrifying words, expressed by a sovereign and omnipotent God. Yes, God had promised the land. But that generation had forfeited their opportunity to receive that promise by their unbelief. Nevertheless, there was the certainty of the promise. The unbelief of the Israelites did not negate the promise, it simply postponed it.

So, the fundamental sin of the Israelites was that they had not obeyed the Lord (did not listen). Therefore, they did not receive the promise; they did not see the land flowing with milk and honey. Interestingly, the word translated "did not listen" (v. 6) is the antonym of the word used in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" The great command of the *shema* is to listen first, then obey.

The phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" is simply a catchphrase that describes the agricultural and pastoral abundance of the land. There was honey from dates that grew in abundant orchards and ample grazing lands for cattle and goats. But that first generation had squandered their participation in the promise.

So, now, the point of circumcision was to renew the covenant. Each male Israelite had to make the individual choice to be a part of the covenant by allowing himself to be circumcised. God's promise was to the nation as a whole, but only those individuals who obeyed would participate.

This new generation, "whom He raised up in their place" (v. 7), by participating in the rite of circumcision, identified itself with Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. Since they had obeyed, they had a claim to the promise of land given to Abraham's descendants. They simply had to wait until they were healed, something they could do since the fear of the Canaanites was so great, and then continue in their obedience as they conquered the land.

After seeing Joshua's obedience, as well as that of the people, the Lord told him "Today I have rolled away the shame of Egypt from you" (v. 9). There is some disagreement as to exactly what the Lord was referring to here. Some have suggested that the reproach of Egypt was the previous disobedience of the Israelites. In other words, God was removing the consequences of the sin from the nation as a whole, though that generation had suffered. Through their obedience, this reproach had been removed.

Others argue that the reproach is the scorn the Egyptians felt toward their slaves, and the fact that they must have rejoiced that the fugitives wandered for forty years in the desert. Rather than view this as an either/or, I prefer to think of it as a both/and. Both ideas are sensible, and there is no reason to reject one or the other.

## The Ceremony of Passover Observed

For Joshua, the rite of circumcision was the necessary preparation for celebrating the Passover. This ceremony, too, had been neglected during the time in the wilderness. Its origin is familiar enough, I'm sure, but let's recall the specific rules that governed participation in it. The Lord told Moses and Aaron,

<sup>43</sup>"This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat it; <sup>44</sup>but as for every slave that someone has purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat it.

<sup>45</sup>A stranger or a hired worker shall not eat it. <sup>46</sup>It is to be eaten in a single house; you are not to bring any of the meat outside of the house, nor are you to break any bone of it. <sup>47</sup>All the congregation of Israel are to celebrate this. <sup>48</sup>But if a stranger resides with you and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, all of his males are to be circumcised, and then he shall come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised male may eat it. <sup>49</sup>The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who resides among you" (Exodus 12:42-49).

Passover was another ceremony which calls to mind the creation of the Israelite nation and God's covenant with it. It is easy to see its connection with circumcision, and to understand why the Lord required the rite of circumcision to be renewed before the Passover was celebrated.

Our passage gives us the details of the renewal of this ceremony. <sup>10</sup>"While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. <sup>11</sup>Then on the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and roasted grain. <sup>12</sup>And the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year" (v. 10-12).

The last time the Israelites had celebrated Passover was two years after leaving Egypt (Numbers 9:1-3). For the next four decades, the observance of this most important day had been ignored. But now, Passover was to be celebrated after crossing the Jordan River. This, too, had been a command of the Lord.

<sup>3</sup>"Then Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. <sup>4</sup>Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. <sup>5</sup>And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month'" (Exodus 13:3-5).

Some scholars have remarked on the fact that there is no mention of the roasted lamb in this account of the Passover. Some have argued that this implies that there were two festivals which the Israelites celebrated; one in which the lamb featured for a nomadic people, and one where unleavened bread was featured for settled agricultural people. However, the people of Israel were both. A better explanation is that the staple diet of the wandering, manna, parallels the main diets of Canaan, cereals, especially barley and wheat.

In other words, the text is not concerned with the precise menu of Passover. Rather it describes the diet of Canaan. The wilderness had passed and the Promised Land had come. Therefore the diet changes. Also, Passover, which had originally served as a reminder of the exodus, now served also as a reminder of the crossing of the Jordan.

As our passage concludes, we see the transition from wilderness to habitation in the Promised land. "On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and roasted grain" (v. 11). Then "the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land" (v. 12). Appreciate the sequences of events. The Israelites renew the rite of circumcision. Then they celebrate Passover. The next day they eat the fruit of the land. The next day manna ceases. But let us make no mistake, ordinary provisions are still God's grace.

Yes, the manna had sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years. But now there was no need. They ate the produce of the land. This, too, had been a promise, though a promise that came with a command.

<sup>10</sup>And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you - with great and good cities that you did not build, <sup>11</sup>and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant - and when you eat and are full, <sup>12</sup>then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

We will see in the future how well the Israelites did at taking care lest they forget the Lord.

### **Takeaways**

There is much to appreciate in this passage of rites and ceremony. First, we can be reminded that, for the Israelite and for us, obedience is the key to a relationship with God. Perhaps you might find yourself in the place of the Israelites this morning. Perhaps there are some habits of the Christian

faith that have been neglected in recent days, or even weeks. Serious Bible reading. Devoted, attentive times of prayer. Genuine fellowship with other believers. There is no better time than the present to repent, and renew your walk with God.

Second, we can use this passage to remember that God will finish what He has begun. It had taken forty years, but God's promise was never in doubt of being fulfilled. God promised His people the land, and that land they were going to receive. So it is with us. Our redemption and deliverance, God's promise to bring us to completion one day with Him in glory might take longer than we wish, but it is certain nonetheless.

Finally, for the Christian, it is easy to see today of all days, that Easter is the celebration that replaces all of this. Belief in the work of Christ inaugurates a new life just as the rite of circumcision and the Passover celebration placed the people of Israel within the covenant of God. But this new covenant is so much better. It is not merely once in a lifetime or once a year, it can, and should, be celebrated daily.