



Text: Joshua 5:1-15¹
Series: Facing Life with Courage
Title: Part 4 – A New Beginning, Again
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We've been coming to the Book of Joshua for the last three weeks, looking for what God's Word has to say to us on how to "Face Life with Courage." The Book of Joshua tells us the story of how God led the people of Israel to take possession of the land of promise. It's a book full of battles, both physical and spiritual, of challenges to faith and obedience of all kinds. The overarching theme of Joshua is found in chapter 1, verse 9. The Lord spoke to Joshua, the leader of the people of Israel, on the eve of the conquest of the land and spoke words into his spirit that were intended to put steel in his bones and strength in his hands. The Lord said...

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9

In the past three weeks we've seen how God prepared his people for the task that lay ahead.

In the first week we saw how God established that His Word was Joshua's source of confidence in every circumstance that he would face. If we're going to face life with courage, our lives needed to find their "bottom line" in what the Lord has said to us, not in the circumstances that confront us.

Then with Rahab, we saw how Rahab's confidence in the Lord was grounded in what she knew of the mighty works of God. If we're going to face life with courage, our faith also needs to be established upon what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the greatest of his mighty works.

And last week, we saw how the people of Israel were challenged to remember for years to come what God did in stopping the water of the Jordan River and bringing the people into the land. The memorial stones that were set up were designed to challenge Israel to remember God's provision for them. If we're going to face life with courage, we need to come back again and again to the written "stones," the Word of God, and be challenged by its record of God's mighty works and what those works mean for us.

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You would think that after all this preparation that it must be time to get on with the task of conquest but it isn't. There is a lesson in the very fact that in the fifth chapter of the Book of Joshua we're still dealing with preparation and not conquest. We are quick to want to "do something" when God so often calls us first to "be something." In the next chapter, chapter 6, the people confront their first military challenge in the land of promise, but here in chapter 5, God again deals with the quality of the spiritual lives of his people.

Above all things, God wants his people to be holy. More than active, he wants us to be holy. More than successful, he wants us to be holy. More than financially secure, he wants us to be holy. More than happy, he wants us to be holy. More than well-informed, he wants us to be holy. More than gifted, he wants us to be holy. More than competent, he wants us to be holy.

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’” Leviticus 19:1-2

Here on the plains of Jericho, as the songwriter puts it, God invites the people of Israel to “take time to be holy.”

There are three holiness episodes in this last preparation before the conquest of the land begins that are designed by God to shape the character of his people. We're about to enter a world that is different from our own in many respects but there are lessons we can learn from each of these three episodes that will enable us to be God's holy people in our own day as we face the challenges of life.

We're going to be reading a portion of God's Word that might make you feel uncomfortable in its subject matter. It deals with the Old Covenant commandment regarding male circumcision. It is tempting, perhaps, to avoid this portion and move to easier ground but if we did that I believe we would miss an important lesson that God has for us New Covenant believers. I'm going to read Joshua chapter 5, verses 1 to 15, and I invite you to follow along in your Bibles or on the screen behind me.

[READ Joshua 5:1-15]

The **first of the three holiness sessions** deals with the reintroduction of a **covenant sign**, the practice of circumcision. The lesson that the Lord teaches his people in this session is imbedded in their history and the story carries the lesson.

You need to know that there is a direct connection between God's promise of the land to the people of Israel and the practice of the rite of circumcision. This story begins with the Lord making a promise to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation. God said to him...



“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” Genesis 17:7-8

God established a covenant between himself and Abraham. A covenant is essentially a commitment between two parties to fulfill certain promises and duties. In his covenant with Abraham, God promised to be God to Abraham and his descendants and to provide them with a land. Abraham’s duty, as the receiver of God’s promise, was to ensure that he and his descendants kept the covenant sign given to them by God. God said to Abraham...

“As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.” Genesis 17:9-10

God then told Abraham that any of his descendants who did not keep this covenant sign would be excluded from the covenant promise. But it wasn’t merely a matter of going through a physical operation. The central issue in this rite was obedience to the will of God.

There have been many theories down over the years as to why God chose this particular way to indicate his covenant relationship with Israel. But at the end of the day we don’t really know why. No medical reason is given; no moral reason is given; no theological reason is given. God simply says: “this is what you shall do.” He could have chosen some other way to mark his people as his own, but he didn’t. The practice of this rite simply comes down to obedience.

But like all actions in the Bible that call for obedience, there is always something deeper and more important at stake than mere conformity to an external act. The people knew, from the beginning, that outward circumcision was intended to point to something more than ritual conformity. Moses told them...

“And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?... Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” Deuteronomy 10:12-16

The covenant sign that God most longed for was a people who would obey him and love him fully from their hearts. But sadly that had often not been the case.



Behind the story we read in Joshua, there is a sad story of a people who failed to obey God. Even though they had undergone the rite of circumcision, **their hearts were not circumcised.** The writer of Joshua draws our attention to an important distinction between the old generation that had passed away and the new generation that had entered the land of promise...

“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.” Joshua 5:5

Two years after Israel left Egypt, in other words, thirty eight years before our story here in the Book of Joshua, God brought Israel to the southern edge of the land of promise, to a place called Kadesh Barnea. I want you to stop with me for a moment to realize something here. Two years after Israel left Egypt they could have been in the land of promise. The next thirty eight years of wandering in the wilderness need never have happened! But it happened because of the uncircumcised hearts of God’s people.

At Kadesh Barnea God ordered that twelve spies be sent into the land of Canaan to reconnoiter the land. After forty days the twelve men returned. Ten of them sang the praises of the great fertility of the land but they also spoke of the fearsome inhabitants of the land. They counseled that Israel should not attempt to enter the land because they would be destroyed. Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, disagreed. They told Israel that the Lord would give them victory over the people of Canaan and that they should press on and take the land. But sadly, the mass of the people listened to the ten and rejected the counsel of Caleb and Joshua. They cried and wailed and grumbled against Moses and against the Lord...

“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” Numbers 14:2-3

The Lord was angry! He said to Moses...

“How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.” Numbers 14:11-12

And Moses, the great prayer warrior, interceded on behalf of Israel with the Lord. He said to the Lord...

“Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land...



Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, ‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’” Numbers 14:13-16

And Moses asked the Lord to forgive the people of their sin and the Lord relented and did not destroy them “as one man.” But there would be judgment for the rebellion. The Lord “swore” (Num 14:35; Joshua 5:6) – in other words, he promised on oath -- that none of the fighting men, those twenty years of age and older, who refused at Kadesh Barnea to go up and take the land, would live to see the land of promise, except for Caleb and Joshua. And, the Lord said, for every day the spies spent reconnoitering the land the people of Israel who believed their negative report would spend a year in the wilderness, forty years in total.

“But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.” Numbers 14:31-33

And now, thirty eight years later, every one of those men are dead, except for Caleb and Joshua. The “reproach of Egypt” had been taken away. The Egyptian claim that God was killing the people in the wilderness because he was unable to bring them into the land had been silenced. The people were in the land. The reproach was gone! The nations were in awe of the Lord! They were quaking in their boots! Their hearts were melting like jello! God had led his people home!

This generation, the children of those rebels at Kadesh Barnea, had learned the importance of “heart circumcision” through the trials and hardships of the wilderness. And notice, God had brought them into the land even though they hadn’t been physically circumcised. Again, because there is something more important than ritual to God – there is the heart of faith and trust. And this generation trusted the Lord!

But to be fully obedient to the covenant of the Lord, they submitted to the rite of circumcision. What a step of obedience that was. Militarily it made no sense. Humanly speaking it made no sense. At a time when the people should be attacking their enemies because their spirit was broken, they were doing something that physically weakened them. They were allowing their enemies time to regroup and attack and they were even making themselves vulnerable to attack – because they were being obedient to the Lord!

Here is the holiness lesson from this episode...

Holiness is expressed by “heart and body” obedience to the Lord’s Word



The old generation had been disobedient. They perished in the wilderness, the writer of Joshua tells us...

“because they did not obey the voice of the LORD” Joshua 5:6

Before the new generation takes another step in the land of promise, the Lord wants to impress upon them the importance of complete, thoroughgoing, body and soul obedience to his Word. And they submitted to it, because it was the Lord’s word. They unloaded “the reproach of Egypt” that had fallen on their shoulders because of their parent’s disobedience.

Let me make a simple application for us. In the New Testament, Paul talks about believers in Jesus undergoing...

“a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh....” Colossians 2:11

What he’s talking about is a thorough-going repentance from sin. The “flesh” in Paul’s writing refers to that part of our human nature that rebels against the Lordship of Christ. At the conference I attended a few weeks ago, we sang a song that speaks about the need for a thorough “heart and body” dealing with sin in our lives. It is essentially a prayer for holiness. Bob Kauflin, the songwriter, prayed...

**O great God of highest heaven
Occupy my lowly heart
Own it all and reign supreme
Conquer every rebel power
Let no vice or sin remain
That resists Your holy war
You have loved and purchased me
Make me Yours forevermore**

**I was blinded by my sin
Had no ears to hear Your voice
Did not know Your love within
Had no taste for heaven’s joys
Then Your Spirit gave me life
Opened up Your Word to me
Through the gospel of Your Son
Gave me endless hope and peace**

**Help me now to live a life
That’s dependent on Your grace
Keep my heart and guard my soul
From the evils that I face**



**You are worthy to be praised
With my every thought and deed
O great God of highest heaven
Glorify Your Name through me**

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Repentance isn't accomplished by undergoing any physical rite. It's accomplished by the Spirit of God working on our hearts and changing our lives. Holiness is "heart and body" obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. It involves living by the power of the Spirit in obedience to Jesus to bring glory to the Father. May we be that kind of holy people. May our lives be a doxology to God. May we bring him glory and never shame and reproach and dishonour.

The **second holiness session** that the Lord led his people through involved **keeping of the celebration of Passover** and enjoying the produce of the new land. Not everything about obeying the Lord is a hardship. There is always a balance in the hand of the Lord. Again, this holiness lesson is imbedded in a story.

Passover commemorates the night when the Lord delivered the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses and started them on their journey to the land of promise. It's the story of ten plagues God brought against the Egyptians; it's the story of the parting of the Red Sea; but most of all, it's the story of the night when God's angel brought death to the firstborn sons of every household in Egypt that was not marked by the blood of a lamb.

You can read the whole story in chapter twelve of the Book of Exodus but let me just give you a few of the important aspects of the story. The Lord ordered his people to take a lamb at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year. They were to kill it and then spread some of its blood on the doorposts and lintel of their homes. They were to cook and eat the lamb that night, and everyone was to remain inside the house, dressed, packed and ready to leave. That night, the Lord said, "the destroyer" would "pass over" every home on which the blood has been placed. But in every home that did not have the blood, death would strike the firstborn child of every home. God did exactly as he promised, and the next morning, the Pharaoh ordered that the people of Israel leave Egypt, an event that has come to be called the Exodus.

Moses told the Jewish people...

**"You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever.
And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has
promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you,
'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the
LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in**



**Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.’ ” Exodus
12:24-27**

Passover is the single greatest celebration of the Jewish people. It was celebrated by Jesus and it is celebrated to this day by the Jewish people around the world. Passover and the exodus define the Jewish people as a nation. One of the great longings of Jews around the world is that they might be able to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem one day. The modern Passover celebration ends with the words, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

As dear as Passover is to the hearts of Jews today, it’s remarkable that for the thirty eight years of the wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel did not celebrate Passover. The last time they kept Passover was at the foot of Mount Sinai when God gave them the Law through Moses. But after their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, there is no reference to them keeping Passover. For thirty eight years, they trudged through the desert without celebrating God’s great deliverance. For thirty eight years, no child had asked the question, “What do you mean by this service?” Remember, the Lord had said...

“And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness...” Numbers 14:33

But now, with the past behind them, they can celebrate God’s redemption. They are free to remember. They are free to celebrate. And the children will be given the answer to their question. The lesson here is simply this...

Holiness is empowered by remembering and celebrating God’s great salvation for us!

There was a lot of suffering they could have remembered. There was thirty eight years of funerals in the desert! Fathers and brothers were buried in the sands. Mothers and sisters, too. But on this night, gathered with their families on the plains of Jericho, they remembered, again, God’s mighty and gracious salvation.

We all have regrets. We all have sin. We all have missed opportunities. We all have sadness. But remembering God’s salvation gives us new strength and new dedication. For us, remembering God’s great salvation is remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is God’s final act of salvation for us all. The Apostle Paul encourages us to remember that...

“Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” 1 Corinthians 5:7

Remembering and celebrating Jesus’ death for us is an ongoing encouragement and challenge to us to live in such a way that we honour him and bring him glory.



It's a challenge to put the past behind us and to live new lives in the power of His Spirit.

The **third holiness session** is one that involves only Joshua and **a meeting with a mysterious commander**. But as the leader of the entire nation, what God does with him here trickles down to the rest of the people through his leadership and his teaching. And this lesson is also imbedded in history. In this session Joshua asks two questions. The first question is poorly phrased because he doesn't know to whom he is speaking. The second is surprisingly answered because he's thinking along a different track.

Joshua stands on the plains of Jericho, overlooking the site of the upcoming battle, probably wondering how the lay of the land will shape the fight. He sees a man with a drawn sword and approaches him and asks his first questions, a kind of "who goes there?" question.

"Are you for us or for our adversaries?" Joshua 5:13

The answer he receives moves us very quickly onto, pardon the pun, a different plain. The man answers...

"No;" Joshua 5:14

This is one of my favorite moments in the Bible. It isn't that this person is indifferent to the battle that lies ahead. The point is that Joshua is asking the wrong question. And the identification of this mysterious "man" is crucial in knowing what the right question should be. Essentially, there are two possibilities. Either this man is an angel sent by the Lord, or he is a manifestation of the Lord himself.

Let's put some pieces together and see who this could be.

First of all, he identifies himself as...

"the commander of the army of the LORD" Joshua 5:14

Clearly, this person is a supernatural being. The Lord had promised to Moses that when the people entered the land and began to take possession of it...

"Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him." Exodus 23:20-21

What "army" is he commanding? The Bible sometimes speaks of the stars as the army of the Lord (c.f. Isaiah 40:26) and also of the angels as the armies of



the Lord. (C.f. Psalm 103:19-21) The prophet Elisha was protected by an angelic army that is described as “horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” (2 Kings 6:17)

Jesus referred to the legions of angels he could have called from heaven to keep him from the cross if he had chosen to do so. (Matthew 26:53) I think it’s likely that this is the army to which the commander refers.

Notice Joshua’s response to the man’s self-identification: Joshua **“fell on his face to the earth and worshiped...” (v.14)** And also notice Joshua’s second question:

“What does my lord say to his servant?” Joshua 5:14

You need to know that the word translated as **“worshiped”** is also used of honor that is given to human beings who are superior in rank. Our mayor in Olds is officially referred to as “Her worship, the mayor” and the word here has the same connotation.

And the word translated as **“lord”** is used most frequently in the Bible of human kings and officials, so we’re still not clear as to the identity of this commander. Is he an angel or is the Lord himself? We still don’t know but what happens next tips the balance.

The commander says to Joshua...

“Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.” Joshua 5:14

Who is he? There is only One Person whose very presence makes a place holy. There is only One Person whom the angels of heaven extol as “Holy, Holy, Holy.” There is only One Person whose very name is “holy.” (Isaiah 54:5)

I told you that this holiness session was rooted in a story. Here’s the story. Moses was shepherding in the wilderness and he saw a bush on fire that didn’t burn up. He went near to investigate and from the burning bush a voice spoke to him and said...

“Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Exodus 3:5

It was the voice of the LORD God Almighty that spoke to Moses from the bush. The LORD spoke these exact words to Joshua just as he had to Moses because he had promised that he would be with Joshua just as he had been with Moses.

Now we know who the “commander” is. Now we know the problem with Joshua’s first question. It should not have been “Are you for us or for them?”



because God isn't "on our side or the other side." God can't be conscripted for our cause. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. We are either **for him** or **against him**. (Matthew 12:30)

But Joshua's second question was a good one. **"What does my lord say to his servant?"** But the Lord's answer might have been unexpected. Instead of receiving directions for battle, as he might have expected from the commander, he receives a call to holiness.

Here's the final lesson of these holiness sessions...

Holiness is rooted in our complete submission to the Lord's direction in every area of our lives.

"What does my lord say to his servant?" Joshua 5:14

"Speak, LORD, for your servant hears." 1 Samuel 3:9

The Apostle Peter challenges us with the same call to holiness...

"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" 1 Peter 1:14-

16

That's the mark that God longs to see on his people. May we be that people for his glory.

Let's pray.

- **Invitation to prayer ministry**
- **Final Song: Be Thou My Vision**
- **Benediction**