

The Book of Joshua

Lesson 4: Circumcision, Passover, and the Commander of the Lord's Army

-- Joshua 5:1-15

The river is behind them now. The waters that piled up in a heap have come crashing back down, and the whole nation stands dripping and wide-eyed on the Canaan side of the Jordan. You would think the next scene would be the trumpets and the siege ramps. You would expect Joshua to point at Jericho and say, 'There it is, men, let's take it.' But God does not march His people straight from the river to the battlefield. Before there is any conquest, there is a long, quiet pause at a place called Gilgal. Before God's people fight, God's people are made ready.

And what God asks of them is tender and costly. He tells Joshua to take flint knives and circumcise a whole generation of men who had never carried the covenant sign in their flesh. These were the children of the wilderness, born to parents who had wandered and died under God's discipline. For days the camp is laid up sore and vulnerable, an army that cannot lift a sword, resting in the open within sight of a hostile city. It is a strange way to begin a war. God seems far more interested in who His people belong to than in how quickly they can swing a blade.

Then comes the Passover, kept on the plains of Jericho on the fourteenth day of the month, just as their fathers had kept it the night they left Egypt. The very next morning they eat of the old corn of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain, the firstfruits of the promise they had waited forty years to taste. And the manna that had fallen faithfully every morning for a generation simply stops. No more bread from heaven, because now there is bread from the land. God's provision changes form, but God's provision never fails.

And just when you think the lesson is about consecration and remembrance and gratitude, a Man with a drawn sword stands in Joshua's path. 'Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?' Joshua asks, and the answer rearranges everything. 'Nay; but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come.' Joshua falls on his face. The sandals come off. The ground is holy. Before Israel ever swings a sword at Jericho, the real Commander has already arrived, and the battle, it turns out, was never Joshua's to win. It was the Lord's all along.

Group Discussion: Why do you think God spends an entire chapter on circumcision, Passover, and a meeting with His Commander before He says one word about attacking Jericho, and what does that order of events tell us about how God prepares His people for what is ahead?

Personal Reflection: When you face something big and daunting, are you more tempted to rush into the work or to first make sure your heart belongs wholly to the Lord, and what would it look like for you to pause at your own Gilgal before your next 'Jericho'?

Read Joshua 5:1-15

Study Questions

1. At Gilgal God renews the covenant sign of circumcision on a new generation before any battle is fought (Joshua 5:2-9). What does this tell us about God's priorities, that He cares first about His people belonging to Him before He cares about what they will accomplish?
2. Circumcision marked Israel as a people set apart for God. In what specific area of your life right now is the Lord asking you to be visibly set apart and consecrated to Him, even before you see any 'victory' come from it?
3. God says, 'This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you' (Joshua 5:9), and names the place Gilgal. What 'reproach' had clung to Israel, and what does it reveal about God that He rolls away the shame of His people Himself?
4. Is there a 'reproach' or old shame from your past that you have let define you, when the Lord has been offering to roll it away? What keeps you holding onto it instead of receiving His cleansing?
5. Israel keeps the Passover on the plains of Jericho (Joshua 5:10), remembering the night God spared them and brought them out of Egypt. Why does God so often anchor His people in remembrance before He leads them forward, and what does faithful remembering guard us against?

6. What rhythms of remembrance has the Lord given you, and are you keeping them as living worship or letting them grow into empty routine? Where do you most need to remember what God has done before you take your next step?
7. The morning after the Passover, Israel eats the produce of the land, and 'the manna ceased' (Joshua 5:11–12). What does it reveal about God's faithfulness that His provision changed its form, from bread out of heaven to bread out of the land, yet never once failed His people?
8. Where are you gripping tightly to one form of God's provision and quietly afraid of what happens if it stops? How would it change your peace to trust that the God who fed you in the wilderness is the same God who will feed you in the land?
9. A Man with a drawn sword meets Joshua and says, 'as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come,' and Joshua falls down and worships on holy ground (Joshua 5:13–15). What does this divine appearance teach us about whose battle the conquest really is, and what does it mean for us that the Commander tells Joshua not which side He is on, but that Joshua must get on His side?
10. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way Jesus is forming you through it. Where is He calling you to be consecrated, to remember, to trust His provision, or to fall on your face and let Him be the Commander instead of you?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Colossians 2:11–12, where Paul speaks of a circumcision made without hands and ties true consecration to dying and rising with Christ; 1 Corinthians 5:7, which names Christ as our Passover sacrificed for us, the true Lamb behind the feast Israel kept; Exodus 3:1–6, the burning bush, where Moses too is told to remove his sandals because the ground is holy, the same Lord meeting His servant; Hebrews 4:8–11, which shows that Joshua's rest in the land pointed to a greater rest that remains for the people of God; Romans 2:28–29, where true circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit, and not merely in the flesh.

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