

Worship Before Warfare

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[0:00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading now, and we're continuing in the book of Joshua. And Paul will be preaching to us later from chapter 5. So do turn up Joshua chapter 5. If you don't have a Bible with you, we do have plenty of visitors' Bibles.

The red books here at the front, at the side, and there's some at the back. And if you're really not sure where to get one, if you wave your hand, then one of the welcome team would love to come bring one to you. And if you're using one of those Bibles, that's on page 181. And we're going to be reading Joshua chapter 5 from verse 2 to verse 12.

Joshua 5, beginning then at verse 2. At that time, the Lord said to Joshua, Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.

So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath Haraloth. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them. All the men 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.

[1:43] 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. When the circumcising of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.

And the Lord said to Joshua, Today I have ruled away the reproach of Egypt from you. And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

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. 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.

[2:57] Well, amen. This is God's Word. And we'll return to it shortly. Amen. Well, please have Joshua, chapter 5, open in front of you.

And we'll spend a few minutes together thinking about these verses. Now, this short section is something of a turning point in the book.

Although at first glance, it perhaps seems a little random. You may have been wondering, as Josh read it out to us, why are we focusing on these two paragraphs?

It's a slightly unwelcome intrusion, you might think, into the gripping story that's really starting to build momentum. We've had the spy thriller featuring Rahab. We've had a rerun of the Red Sea with the River Jordan being parted and the people walking through on the dry riverbed.

And Jericho is very much in view. You can see it on the horizon. And we're sort of mentally gearing up for warfare, conflict, conquest. Having just read chapter 5, verse 1, just cast your eyes over the first verse of chapter 5.

[4:11] We read about all the kings of the Amorites quaking in their boots. Their hearts melted, end of verse 1. There was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel. We read that and we think, we're ripe for battle.

Let's get into it. But there's a pause to proceedings here with the start of chapter 5. And it's rather extraordinary, don't you think?

Here is the army preparing for battle. And what you read about here would hardly feature in the SAS Guide to Military Tactics. What happens? Well, they circumcise the entire army.

All the men of fighting age. It's going to take a good week to recover from, I expect. And then at the end of it, they enjoy a national feast. Roast lamb. Maybe roast potatoes as well.

It seems to us utterly bizarre. Why would he do that? Why would Joshua circumcise the army on the brink of warfare and have a feast?

[5:14] But once we look a little closer, once we remember the history and the significance of what is going on here, it starts to make a little more sense. Two great signs and seals are enacted.

Circumcision and the Passover. The great sacraments of the faith. Withheld for 40 years, they're now given again by the Lord. It's really a staggering and gracious act by the Lord as he declares once more his ownership of his people.

They're given the covenant sign of belonging. And he reassures them that his promises, they do prevail. Nothing will stop what he has promised coming to pass.

And that would have given great reassurance to all of God's people there on the brink of battle. Think about the previous four decades of walking in the wilderness. Is the Lord really with us?

Has he not abandoned us? Well, in the clearest way possible, the Lord demonstrates to them that having promise in the land, he was really going to give it to them.

[6:22] These two great signs, circumcision and the Passover. And what shines through these verses above all is God's grace. His grace shines through to God's people.

Four things to note. Number one, God's grace calls his people to obey, come what may. God's grace calls his people to obey, come what may.

The events of this chapter are a gracious reaffirmation to Joshua and all Israel that the Lord was their God. That they were his people. And that his promises stood firm despite the disobedience of the previous generation.

Just as they were on the brink of warfare, God graciously presses pause. No, no, you're going to sit here for a week. I'm going to give you the sign of the covenant.

And he instructs Joshua to circumcise the men of Israel a second time. Now, he's not meaning that these men had already been circumcised. This wasn't re-circumcision.

[7:28] No, no, what he means is the nation of Israel has been circumcised once before. The first generation who left Egypt, they had been circumcised, but this generation hadn't. And so God instructs that they are to be given the sign of the covenant because they hadn't yet received it.

That's the reason given, isn't it? Look at verse 4 and 5. That's the reason that they're giving this sign of circumcision. And in itself, as we've mentioned, that's pretty staggering, don't you think?

Not the best ploy for an army on the brink of battle. You want to be feeding your men up, not crippling them. Can you imagine our Secretary of Defense announcing a new policy just before warfare is launched?

Lads, we're going to get you circumcised the week before battle. It's hardly convincing, is it? But why was this such a priority? Why was the act of circumcision being given to the whole army so important?

Well, the significance lay in what it signified. This was the sign first given to Abraham, remember? A sign that pointed to God's great covenant promises.

[8:41] It was a sign that marked them out as God's people separated, set apart for him. And it was a sign that was meant to be given to every infant male born within the covenant community to mark them out as members of that community.

A community which had uniquely been given the promises of God. Promises that they were to lay hold of by faith. But there's a great irony here, isn't there, in chapter 5.

The sign of the covenant itself was no guarantee of fidelity to it. The first generation, that generation that died in the wilderness, they were all circumcised.

They had been given the sign of the covenant. And yet, when it came to the crunch, they disobeyed. They perished because they did not obey the voice of their Lord.

On the other hand, the second generation, the generation who were uncircumcised, they were raised up in the place of the first. And here they're given the land.

[9:47] They've crossed over the Jordan already. See, it's quite possible to receive the sign of the covenant and yet remain in unbelief. See, the promises to which circumcision pointed had to be taken hold of by faith.

Grasped. According to the book of Joshua, that means seeking refuge in the Lord. It means flinging yourself upon His mercy. It means hearing His word and doing it.

Faith means stepping into the raging Jordan at full flood. Trusting that God is actually going to stop the river. Faith means laying hold of God's promises no matter what past generations have done.

God's promises, they never fail. And that was the experience of this second generation in the wilderness.

God had sworn, verse 6, to their fathers that He would give them a land flowing with milk and honey. But despite the disbelief of their parents, despite the previous generation, that promise, it still held firm.

[10:53] It hadn't disappeared. It did. Perhaps we sometimes think that man's unbelief, disobedience, can damage, perhaps even faithfully, God's promises.

Perhaps you've been in a situation where people have so blatantly disobeyed and demonstrated unbelief, perhaps even in the church, that your very faith has been rocked. Perhaps you've seen what previous generations have done.

You think, is God really holding firm to His promises? That sure and certain bedrock that you've held onto for so long, has that swept away? Well, that was the experience of the second generation, wasn't it?

Devastating to wander through the wilderness for all those decades, because of the unbelief of your parents. And that question, is God really? Is He really going to keep His promises?

Is He really going to give us the land? Is there hope for us? Well, yes, there is. That's the message of this passage.

[12:04] There is hope. God hasn't abandoned you. God's promise was totally unmoved. It held firm.

When everything else in life ebbs and flows, when people let you down, perhaps even your own leaders in the faith, they fall. Maybe they fail in a major way. Remember that the promises of God endure.

They hold firm. Every word, every word the Lord has promised will come to pass. And with the giving of this sign of circumcision, God was again saying to His people, I am your God.

You are my people. I haven't forgotten you. And so Joshua was quite right to immediately obey the command of the Lord.

Verse 2. The Lord commands him. And so Joshua did it. Verse 3. He made the knives. He circumcised the sons of Israel. Verse 3. And here's the thing.

[13:09] We are to obey God's word, even when it seems to us rather puzzling, perplexing at first. Don't you think there would have been folk there questioning this mass circumcision of the army just as they're about to head into war?

You can imagine folk muttering to one another. Has not Joshua read Genesis 34? You know the story about the Shechemites who were circumcised and then whilst they were recovering, they were slaughtered?

Do you not remember that, Joshua? This is laying us open to a mass of vulnerability here. On the eve of battle, this is not a good idea. But they do it.

Joshua does it. And doing things God's way is always the way to blessing. Just look at what happens in the next chapter. We'll see it next week. Jericho.

They win that battle. They take that city without a single sword been drawn. So here's the question, the challenge that this poses for us, for you.

[14:17] Will you be obedient to the Lord even when it doesn't make immediate sense to you? Will you do things God's way even when everything else is pulling you in the opposite direction?

These verses tell us very clearly that yes, it is always worth obeying the Lord. We must prioritize obedience to Him above all other considerations. Right worship came first before warfare for the army of Joshua.

You can imagine Joshua there with his army generals doing the pros and cons. How many pros would be under the circumcision banner? Not many. The cons, huge list.

But it's always right to obey the Lord no matter what we might think. It seems counterintuitive but it's the right call.

God's ways are always the best ways. It's always the right call to do things God's way. Think about the sort of situations you may face where the Lord's word is pretty clear but you can find yourself arguing the opposite.

[15:32] I'm not sure that's really the best. Maybe you're dating a non-Christian. God's word is pretty plain.

Do not be unequally yoked. But your Netflix films, your social media, your friends will perhaps encourage you in the opposite direction. Your own desires will have you justify the relationship, won't they?

You fear the consequences of ending it. But to do things the Lord's way is always the way of blessing. When we do things our way in defiance of God's clear way, we shouldn't be surprised if that road ends in disaster.

Or maybe you're neglecting your church family. The Lord tells us very clearly, do not neglect meeting together. But, you know, other things have taken priority on Sundays.

You know, the gigs, the sports fixtures, the weekends away. If you've got kids, maybe it's the children's parties on Sunday mornings. The sports matches.

[16 : 45] But worship needs to come first. God's ways must always come first. That's the pattern we see here for Joshua and the people. They obey the word of the Lord, come what may.

Worship, obedience to the Lord, that always takes priority. It's always the best way. That's the first thing we see here. Second, God's grace rolls back past disgrace.

once Joshua has circumcised the entire army. The Lord speaks words of wonderful grace.

Doesn't he? Look at verse 9, just at the end of that section. So, verse 8, Joshua's done it. The whole nation have been circumcised.

And the Lord, verse 9, said to Joshua, today, I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. Four decades prior to this moment, Israel had left Egypt.

[17 : 52] They had left slavery and they had left it in order to live in a land that God had promised them. It was a journey that should have taken a matter of weeks. But in reality, they ended up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

and so they became the butt of Egyptian jokes. How pitiful it would have looked to the Egyptians, seeing the Israelites wandering around in the wilderness year after year.

Listen to the words of Moses in the moments after their refusal to enter the land. this is recorded in Numbers 14 and the Lord's declaration that He will strike the people with pestilence and disinherit them.

Here's what Moses said, but Moses said to the Lord, then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought this people in your might from among them.

Now, if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of your fame will say, it is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that He swore to give them, that He's killed them in the wilderness.

[18 : 59] The Egyptians watching this going on, they would have concluded, wouldn't they, that the God of Israel, what good is He? He's abandoned them. Total disaster.

A whole generation died in the wilderness. But here, God is saying, verse 9, that whole reproach stage in the life of God's people, that is now behind them.

It's been rolled away. The reproach of Egypt, that's a thing of the past. No longer will the Egyptians make fun of you for you walking in the wilderness. The disgrace of the unbelieving generation was something in the past, and now this second generation has been circumcised, fresh starts, a new beginning.

And that is the way God works, then and now. For anyone who by faith clings to the promises of God fully and finally revealed in Christ, the old has gone.

All past reproach is wonderfully, graciously rolled away. It doesn't matter how bad it might look in our eyes, you might think that that sin was too serious, too heinous, but there is grace for you.

[20 : 15] Even those years you regret, they've been rolled away. there is grace even for you. There was grace for those Israelites and for them that past sin couldn't have been much worse.

The refusal to enter the land 40 years prior, that was one of the most catastrophic, devastating moments in the whole Bible. And yet the Lord rolled it away.

The promise of the land was held out even to them, even though their parents generation failed, God's grace remains. God's grace rolls back past disgrace.

Here's the third thing we see in this passage. We see God's grace signed and sealed. Signed and sealed. The very first thing that God's people do when they step back on the west bank of the Jordan, as they set foot in the promised land, the first thing that the Lord calls them to do are to apply the two signs of the covenant relationship with the Lord.

We've seen the first one already, circumcision. The second one we see in verse 10, they kept the Passover. They are the Old Testament sacraments, that sign and seal of the covenant promises of the Lord to his people.

[21 : 36] Circumcision was, according to the Apostle Paul, Romans 4, he says, it is a sign. It was a sign pointing to a spiritual reality. It was a sign of initiation into the people of God.

It marked you out as belonging and it was only given once. Passover was the other sign, a sign all about remembrance and renewal.

Specifically, it was remembrance about that deliverance from Egypt, that rescue from slavery, that first Passover, Exodus 12, as the angel of death passed over the homes of those that had the blood of the lamb marked on the doorposts.

And that Passover was to be celebrated each year on the 14th day of the first month. And notice the date in our passage, verse 10, the 14th day of the month.

So here they are, 40 years on to the day. And sitting there on the plains of Jericho, having just crossed over the Jordan, on dry land, the Passover reminded the people that the same God who brought them out of Egypt, he would certainly bring them into full possession in the land of Canaan.

[22 : 55] And again, the people were careful to obey the command of the Lord. It wasn't convenient, perhaps, it wasn't about the best preparation for battle, but they did it.

They did not neglect the means of grace, they did not neglect circumcision or Passover. And this is a word to us as well. The Lord has commanded us to make use of the two sacraments which fulfill circumcision and Passover.

We call them baptism and communion now. And we are perhaps tempted in our western evangelical circles to not think of the sacraments carefully or deeply enough. But this is the very first thing that God's people attend to, having crossed the Jordan.

And that's pretty striking, isn't it? The very first things they do are to mark the sacraments the Lord has given them. They were careful not to neglect the visible signs and seals that the Lord has given.

Signs and seals that would declare to them again His promises that would assure them of the reality of His promises. So before the battle could begin, before they could even think about taking on Jericho and the rest of Canaan, before all that, the people had to submit themselves to God's ways, God's grace, to remind themselves of His promises.

[24 : 26] And the sacraments today should do the same for us. Communion, the bread, the wine, they remind us, don't they, of the life and the death of the Lord Jesus. We should cling to those promises that He who died and rose again for our salvation.

He will bring us safe to heaven. As we face uncertainties all the time, we don't know what tomorrow will bring. As we face a great enemy who wants to destroy the church, as we face death itself, in the face of all that, we have absolute assurance that as real as that bread is, as real as the wine going down our throats is, as real and tangible as those are, so real and tangible are God's promises of our eternity with Him.

So don't neglect the visible sacraments the Lord has given us. Fourth thing in this passage, we finally see that God's grace provides for our needs.

Three times here at the end, verses 11, I think it's verse 12, 11 and 12, three times we read about that the people ate the produce of the land.

Verse 11, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land. Verse 12, the manna ceased the day after they ate the produce of the land. And there was no longer any manna for the people of Israel, but they ate the fruit of the land of Canaan that year, three times.

[25:57] Not only are they now in the land, but they're enjoying the fruit of it. And I imagine this was something of a relief to them, having 40 years of only eating manna. It would have got a bit tedious, I imagine, even after a two-year gap, but 40 years of eating manna.

But it was a gracious and miraculous provision from the Lord, all those years in the wilderness. God's God provides for his people through the outwardly miraculous, with the manna, through the wilderness, but also through the outwardly ordinary, the very mundane food that was cultivated on the land.

God's grace or provision is seen just as much here as there has been in the previous 40 years. Food from heaven in the wilderness and food from the ground in the land.

Both are a wonderful provision from the Lord. And for most of the time, for most of us, God's gift, His provision, they're not all singing or dancing, are they?

Extraordinary, supernatural, it's not manna falling from heaven. But rather the way the Lord does provide for us is in the normal everyday. Provisions of food on the table, of a warm bed and a roof over our heads.

[27:24] We barely even think about them. The drying up of rivers, the passing of seas, food from heaven, they're not normal ways in which God ensures His people are provided for.

Which is not to say that the way He provides for His people now is any less miraculous or supernatural. So let's not be fooled by outward appearances. Let's not forget that our God works supernaturally in the seemingly mundane, in the unmiraculous looking.

He works in the very normal looking things. And here they are in the land, eating the fruit of us. Very normal looking, but a wonderful provision.

This rather remarkable pause and proceedings here, chapter 5, to allow for circumcision, to mark Passover, to have the manna being ceased, to being provided by the Lord, and instead they're eating the food of the land.

This was hugely significant for the people of Israel as they stood on the brink of major conquest. Here they are, ready to go into battle. All this was necessary preparation.

[28:36] It marked a fresh start, a reaffirmation of God's promises, a visible sign setting them apart. But, they remembered as they ate the Passover, the great rescue, 40 years before.

Now, they were ready for the conflict to come. All that happens here, worship had to come before warfare. Being right with the Lord, being reminded of His promises, had to take place before the conflict that was to come.

Three implications, as we close. All of this took place, as we said, as Israel on the brink of warfare.

And the people of God today, we are engaged in warfare. Although, it's not a war fought with swords and shields, but a spiritual war, the war that Paul speaks about in Ephesians chapter 6, a war that's raged since the dawn of time, between the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpents.

A spiritual war. What are the implications for us, as we engage in that battle? Number one, heed the warning of the first generation. Heed the warning of the first generation.

[29:52] God's promises may be sure, but we can forfeit them through unbelief. That was the experience of the first generation. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, they are an example to us.

A negative example, an example not to follow. They demonstrate how not to relate to the promises of God. They responded, when faced with the crossing of the Jordan, they responded with unbelief.

They didn't go. They perished in the wilderness. And this short passage is at pains to reiterate that fact. Twice, it mentions that that first generation perished in the wilderness.

And we who live this side of the cross, we have much greater promises. We look back and promises fulfilled. And so, we have many greater reasons to trust in what God has said to us.

Far few reasons to disobey. So, let's heed the warning of that first generation, the generation who perished. Don't be slow to obey God's word.

[30:53] Rather, note the second generation. They obeyed the Lord, even when it seemed inconvenient, maybe even strange. They obeyed the Lord.

Second implication, cling to His promises. The prospect of battle, the fear of the enemy, the uncertainty of the outcome, they were all factors in the failure of that first generation.

And the only thing that will sustain us, that will sustain you, in the spiritual battles that we face, is the enduring word of God, and all His promises. That's the only thing that will keep us going. So, in Paul's list of armor for the Christian in Ephesians 6, at the root of it, is the word of God.

It's the truth that we have in our Bibles. His word of promise. And that is what will equip us, for the battles to come. The Bible, is a weapon itself.

We are to feed on it. Have confidence in it. So, let's arm ourselves, with the word of God. Not one word of it will fail or fall.

[32:01] All will come to pass. All will one day see that Christ is Lord over all the earth. Every knee will bow down in acknowledgement of Him, because He's won the war.

He's already struck the final blow. And we're to be careful to remember those promises, particularly as we give the signs and seals of baptism and communion.

Don't neglect those. Think highly of them. Treasure them. As we do that as a church, regularly. And lastly, we have to trust His provision.

God wonderfully provided for His people during those wilderness years, and He continued to do so as they went into the land. God, the provision looked very different, but the Lord provided.

He assured His people on the brink of major battle that He was with them, that He would never forsake them. And we have the very same God. His promises are unchanging.

[33:04] He provides for us. We can trust Him. And this is a hugely encouraging passage. God's promises prevail no matter what happens.

No matter what God's enemies do. No matter our past performances or past failures. His words cannot fail. And He will surely bring you safe through the battles that we will surely face.

He will bring you safe through the Jordan to Canaan's side. He will bring you to the rest that He has promised. We can trust Him. We can trust Him because He's faithful.

Let me pray. And then we'll sing together to close. Our Heavenly Father, we thank You again for Your amazing, Your wonderful grace which You extend to Your people even though time and time again we fail, we falter.

we go our own way and yet Your promises remain unchanged. Thank You for the evidence of Your grace, Your constancy, Your faithfulness in this passage.

[34:32] And help us to know that You are to be trusted. That You never fail. And so help us to be a people that do walk by faith.

And not only by what we see. Help us to do that for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.