

God's Prevailing Promises

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Well, we're continuing this evening our series in the book of Joshua, so please do turn to your Bibles, to Joshua chapter 5, which you'll find on page 181, if you have one of the blue church Bibles, Joshua chapter 5.

Now we're a little way into a series in Joshua this evening, and the last few weeks we've been in chapters 1 to 4, which really charts the progress of the people of Israel as they cross over into the land.

And the next section we head into from the start of chapter 6 is the beginning of the conquest of the land. And this little passage we're looking at this evening is really a bit of a bridge between the crossing over and the beginning of the conquest.

So I'll start in chapter 5, verse 1, through to verse 12 of chapter 5.

So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeah Theraloth. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them.

[1 : 41] All the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they'd 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 came out of Egypt had not been circumcised.

For the people of Israel walked 40 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.

The Lord swore to them that he would not let them see the land that he had sworn to their fathers to give us a land flowing of 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 rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

[2 : 56] While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the 14th day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho. And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate 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 the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Please do turn to Joshua and have chapter 5 open in front of you.

We'll be looking at verses 2 to 12 this evening of Joshua 5. Now this short section in Joshua is something of a turning point in the book.

As I said before the reading, we're moving from the crossing over into the land to the conquest of the land. And at first glance, this passage appears a little random.

- [4 : 09] A slightly unwelcome intrusion into a gripping story that is starting to build momentum. We've had the spy thriller featuring Rahab. We've had the rerun of the Red Sea with the drying up of the River Jordan in the middle of flood season.
- Jericho is now in view on the horizon. And we, the reader, are mentally gearing up for war. As the army assembles, as they are there on the west bank of the Jordan, at last in the promised land.
- There's a land to be conquered. And we're ready for the battle. And having just read chapter 5 verse 1, you're thinking, right, Jericho is there for the taking.
- Let's get on. Let's press on. Let's have them. But there's a pause to proceedings here in chapter 5. And it's rather extraordinary. Especially so because they're preparing for battle.
- I don't think you'd find this in the SAS Guide to Military Tactics. What happens? Well, they circumcise all the men of fighting age. And that will take a good week to recover from.
- [5 : 17] And they enjoy the national feast afterwards, roast lamb and unleavened bread. From one point of view, it's utterly bizarre. Or at least it seems so on a cursory reading.
- Once we look a little closer, once we remember the history and the significance of what's going on here, it starts to make a little more sense. This is a passage all about the unfailing promises of God, which despite the disobedience of the first generation still stand, and upon which the second generation pin everything.
- This is a new start. The end to the wilderness wanderings. A firm line is drawn under the horrors of slavery in Egypt. And the fulfillment of what was long promised is beginning to take place.
- What we read about here is a staggering and gracious act by the Lord as he declares his ownership of his people. As they're given the covenant sign of belonging, he reassures them that his promises prevail.
- And nothing will stop them from coming to pass. Now, what great reassurance that would have given to Joshua and his army. God graciously gives them reassurance upon reassurance upon reassurance.
- [6 : 41] And now, that great affirmation of his promises, the sign of the covenant, circumcision, which for decades had been withheld, is now given to his people.
- God was, in the clearest way possible, demonstrating to them that having promised them a land of rest, he was going to give it to them.
- Three points. Firstly, God's promises prevail over man's seemingly fatal disobedience. God's promises prevail over man's seemingly fatal disobedience.
- Again and again, we read that a whole generation had died. That whole wilderness generation had died in that wilderness, but the plans and purposes of God did not die with them.
- The fact that God's promises prevail over man's seeming fatal disobedience is the truth that drives this passage. Yes, one generation disobeyed. They died in the desert.
- [7 : 49] But the promise of God lives on and will not be thwarted. How encouraging would that have been for the second generation? And for every reader afterwards who read this account, the disobedience of prior generations did not negate the promises that God made.
- What grounds for total confidence for that second generation and every generation since, including us, his promises are unfailing.
- Now imagine that for Joshua, God's promises seem for many years to be rather distant. He was a man who was right there in the middle of Kadesh Barnea, who witnessed up close the catastrophic unbelief of a nation.

All those generations, all those decades wandering in the wilderness, marked by the death of all his peers, all those who had left Egypt with him had died in the desert.

Every one of them, even Moses. But despite that, despite that unbelieving generation, God's promise prevails.

[9 : 00] And the events of this chapter are a gracious reaffirmation to Joshua and to all Israel that he was their God and that they were his people and that his promises stood.

And just as they were on the brink of conquest, just as they were gearing up for battle, God graciously presses the pause button. He gives them the sign of the covenant.

He instructs Joshua there in verse 2 to circumcise the sons of Israel a second time. Now, of course, this is not meaning that those particular men had been circumcised already, but rather the nation of Israel had been circumcised before.

The first generation who left Egypt, they had been circumcised. But that second generation, the generation born in the wilderness, for whatever reason, hadn't. And so God instructs that they be given the sign of the covenant because they hadn't yet received it.

That's the reason given there for circumcising the second generation. Just take a look at verses 4 and 5. The reason there to be circumcised is because they haven't yet received the sign.

[10 : 14] The reason for them not having been given the sign isn't mentioned, but it was something that God wanted Joshua to address and to address immediately and before they went into battle.

Now, that in itself is slightly staggering, isn't it? Not the best ploy as an army is on the brink of battle. You want to be feeding them up, not crippling them. Imagine our Secretary of Defense issuing an order for a mass circumcision of the British Army as they prepare for the next conflict.

It would be astonishing, wouldn't it? Mr. Fallon would be given a pretty tough time in the Commons, I think, on that one. But why was this act of circumcision such a priority?

Why, when they were on the brink of battle, was this the one thing that Joshua was to do? Well, the significance lay in what it signified.

This was the sign first given to Abraham, a sign that pointed to God's great covenant promises, a sign that marked them out as God's people. It was a sign that was meant to be given to every infant male born within the covenant community to mark them as members of that community, a community that had uniquely been given the promises of God promises that they were to lay hold of by faith.

[11 : 40] But there's great irony, isn't there, in chapter 5. The fact that the sign was given was no guarantee of fidelity to God's promises.

The first generation, the generation that had died in the desert, they were circumcised. They had been given the sign of the covenant. But when the crunch came, they disobeyed.

They wouldn't enter the land. They perished because they did not obey the voice of God. And on the other hand, the second generation, the generation born in the wilderness, the generation who were uncircumcised, they were raised up in the place of the first generation.

They were the ones who stepped forth in faith into the river. It's quite possible to receive the sign and yet remain in unbelief.

You can receive the sacraments and yet have no faith. Being circumcised, indeed being baptized, did not guarantee salvation as this passage so clearly demonstrates.

[12 : 52] It was perfectly possible to be a descendant of Abraham, to be circumcised, and yet to not make it. You see, the promises to which circumcision pointed had to be grasped by faith.

And faith, according to the book of Joshua, means seeking refuge in the Lord, flinging yourself upon his mercy. Faith means stepping forth into the river Jordan in full flood and trusting that God is actually going to do what he says and stop the river.

Faith means laying hold of God's promises no matter what past generations have done. God's promises prevail. God's promises to Abraham prevail.

That was the experience of that 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.

And despite the belief of their parents' generation, that promise still held firm. That generation forfeited their share in the promise through their unbelief.

[14 : 03] But the promise itself was unshaken, unmoved, unannulled. God's promises cannot be shaken.

God's promises can be shaken. God's promises perhaps we sometimes think that man's unbelief, his disobedience can somehow damage perhaps even faithfully God's promises.

Jesus. Perhaps you've been in a situation where people have so blatantly demonstrated unbelief, perhaps even in the church, that your very faith has been rocked.

That sure and certain bedrock that you knew for so long has been shaken more than you thought possible. Well, that was the experience of that second generation, wasn't it?

Devastating to wander about in the wilderness for 40 years, decade after decade because of the unbelief of a generation. Is God really going to keep his promise?

[15 : 04] Is he really going to bring us to the promised land? Is there hope for us? Well, God's promise was totally unmoved. It held firm.

When everything else in life ebbs and flows, when people let you down, perhaps even the leaders in the faith fall or fail you in a major way, remember the promises of God are enduring.

Every word will come to pass. It can often be devastating, can't it, when a church leader goes off the rails. It can be deeply troubling for an entire congregation.

It shakes us when we hear about it from a distance. But God's words, his enduring word, is unshaken. That is the one bedrock we can be sure of.

God's promises never fail. They endure. Perhaps it's your own past unbelief. You keep coming back to us. Is there really hope for me in light of everything I've done?

[16 : 15] Well, yes, there is because it does not depend on you, but on the enduring, unchanging, never failing promises of God. Man's unbelief cannot annul, cannot touch, cannot shake God's promises.

They endure. Well, there's our first point. Secondly, God's promises prevail and roll back past disgrace. Once Joshua had circumcised the whole generation, the Lord speaks, and he speaks words of wonderful grace.

Look down at verse 9. Today, I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. Now, four decades prior to this moment, Israel had left Egypt.

They had left slavery and had left in order to live in a land long promised to them. But in reality, that generation ended up wandering in the wilderness and so became the butt of Egyptian jokes.

How pitiful it would have looked to the Egyptians looking on, a whole nation out in the wilderness wandering around for decades. Listen to the words of Moses in the moments after their refusal to enter the land in Numbers 14.

[17 : 34] And the Lord declares that he will strike the people with pestilence and disinherit them. Listen to Moses' words. 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 has killed them in the wilderness.

Moses knew what the Egyptians would think as they watched this happening. The Egyptians witnessing the goings on in the wilderness would have concluded that the God of Israel had abandoned them.

It was a disaster. But here, in Joshua 5, verse 9, the Lord is saying that that whole reproach stage, that whole time in the wilderness, that was not behind them.

That was being rolled away. The disgrace of that unbelieving generation was something in the past now. And it was marked by the circumcision of a second generation.

[18 : 47] A fresh start. A new beginning. And that is the way God works then and now. For anyone who clings by faith to the promises of God fully and finally revealed in Christ, the old has gone.

All past reproach is wonderfully and graciously rolled away. It does not matter how bad it might look in your own eyes. You might think the sin was too serious, too heinous.

But there is grace for you. There was grace for those Israelites and for them the past sin couldn't have been much worse, could it?

That refusal to enter the land was one of the most catastrophic and serious moments of disobedience in the whole Bible. That was in their memory and yet the Lord rolled it away.

The promise of the land still held and it was being held out to them. how gracious God is. Past disgrace rolled away.

[19 : 55] And as the Lord did that, the people were able to enjoy the provision of the land here at the start of chapter 5. Here's our third point. God's promises prevail so trust Him to provide.

Three times here at the end we read that the people ate the produce of the promised 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. God's promises prevail before their very eyes.

Not only are they now in the land but they're able to enjoy the fruit of that land. Now this must have been a huge relief to them. Forty years of a diet that consisted of manna and only manna might have started to wear a little thin and it was this gracious and miraculous provision through their wilderness wanderings but I'm sure the people were glad to enjoy a bit of variety in their diet as they began to eat the produce of the land.

Now that is not to say that the provision of the food from the land was any less miraculous. God provides for his people through the outwardly miraculous and he provides for his people through the outwardly ordinary.

[21 : 23] Food from heaven in the wilderness that was outwardly miraculous. Food from the ground in the land outwardly ordinary but both are a wonderful provision from the Lord.

and for most of us most of the time God's gifts his provisions are not all singing all dancing extraordinary but often they're the ordinary daily normal provisions that we barely even think about.

To say that God's promises prevail is not necessarily to say that God's promises are realized in astonishing and visibly miraculous ways all the time. The drying up of rivers the parting of seas food from heaven they're not the normal ways in which God provides for his people to ensure that they're provided for.

So let's not be fooled by outward appearances let's not forget that our God works supernaturally in the seemingly mundane and unmiraculous looking. He works supernaturally through his people the church.

what we're doing here this evening appears very ordinary but it is the way in which God makes provision to sustain his people. This rather remarkable pause in proceedings here in chapter 5 to allow for circumcision to allow for Passover for the ceasing of the manna was hugely significant for the people of Israel as they stood on the brink of conquest.

[23 : 05] This was a necessary preparation. It marked a fresh start a reaffirmation of all that God had promised to his people a visible sign given to them to set them apart as his.

They remembered as they ate the Passover together the great rescue from Egypt achieved by the Lord alone. Now they were ready for the conflict to come. They had the rock-solid assurance that God's promises would prevail no matter what.

They were assured of his continued provision with seamless food supply from manna to land being produced from the land. With God's promises and provisions both assured they could move forward into conquest with faith and assurance.

all of this took place as Israel were on the brink of warfare. And the people of God are today engaged in warfare.

We are engaged in warfare although not a war fought with swords and shields. It's a spiritual war. A war that Paul speaks about in Ephesians chapter 6.

[24 : 22] The war that has raged since the dawn of time between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. So what are the implications for us as we engage in that spiritual battle?

What are the implications from this passage? Well firstly we are to heed the warning of that first generation. 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 emulate. They demonstrate how not to respond to the promises of God. They responded with unbelief. And so they perished in the wilderness.

Our short passage here is at pains to reiterate the fact twice that that generation perished in the wilderness. us. But we who live this side of the cross, we have much greater promises.

[25 : 28] We look back on promises fulfilled. And so we have much greater reasons to trust even than they did. Far fewer reasons to disobey.

Heed the warning of that first generation. Yes, God's promises prevail. But don't forfeit your inheritance in those promises through unbelief.

Heed the warning. But secondly, we are to cling to those promises. The prospect of battle, the fear of the enemy, uncertainty about the outcome, they were all factors in the failure of that first generation.

And the only thing that will sustain us, sustain you in the spiritual battles we face, is the enduring word of God and his promises. In Paul's list of armor for the Christian in Ephesians 6, the very root of that armor is the word of God.

It is the truth as we have it in the Bible, his word of promise. That is what will equip you for the battle. The Bible is the weapon itself. And so we are to feed on it, to have confidence in it.

[26 : 50] How foolish would it be to go into battle unarmed? We have the weapon. So let's arm ourselves with it. And let's remember that not one word will fall to the ground.

Not one word will prove to be untrue. All will come to pass. All that God has said in his word will come to pass. All will see one day that Christ is Lord over the entire universe.

Every knee will bow in acknowledgement of him because he has won the war. He has already struck the decisive and fatal blow. That is the news the gospel proclaims.

And we too are to proclaim it. We are to proclaim Christ's victory in the battle. We are to go forth into the world to declare that, to offer people peace terms.

Which side are you on? His word proves true. His promises will not fall to the ground. So cling to them. Cling to his promises.

[28 : 00] How reassuring that is. No matter what's happened in the past, no matter the prior disobedience of a generation, we can cling to his promises. They are the one thing that stands. And thirdly, we can trust his provision.

God wonderfully provided for his people during their wilderness wanderings and on into the land. The provision looked very different. Manna in the wilderness and the fruit of the land in Canaan.

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 same God. He is unchanging. He provides for us still.

So let's trust him. He has miraculously provided for us in recent times. Unexpected provisions. A new location in the west of the city.

Another one in the south. These are remarkable, but unusual. But let's not demand such things. Let's not expect God to provide such extraordinary provisions every six months.

[29 : 10] we could barely cope. I think Willie would pass out. But we perhaps shouldn't be surprised if he does. But we also shouldn't be surprised if his pattern of provision for us in the coming weeks and months and years is the run of the mill, the ordinary, the day-to-day sort of provisions that he usually provides.

because we know that even though they might look ordinary, they are supernatural and more than we deserve. He is a gracious God.

He knows that we are in the midst of battle. He knows that we need provisions and he will provide and sustain us so we can trust him. This is a hugely encouraging passage.

God's promises prevail no matter what happens, no matter what God's enemies do, no matter our performance or past failures, his word endures, his promises prevail.

That is what we cling to. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. He will bring you safely through the battles we face now.

[30 : 29] He will surely bring you through death to life eternal. He will surely bring you to the rest he has promised. Trust him for he is faithful.

Let me pray. Amen. The Lord said to Joshua, today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.

Lord, what words of grace. What reassurance for your people. What reassurance to be marked out as yours, to be given the sign of the covenant.

And all that included, all that pointed to, all the promises that you made to Abraham. what assurance you give to your people. And what assurance you give to us that not one word of yours will prove to be untrue.

Not one promise that you have made will fall to the ground. You are a faithful God and we can trust you. So please would you help us.

[31 : 50] Help us to fling ourselves upon your mercy. To fling ourselves upon you because you are the one who is trustworthy. You are the one who provides. You alone will see us safe through to Canaan's side.

We thank you for your faithfulness. In Jesus' name. Amen.