



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Jesus of the Old Testament

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PART FOUR

Summer Series—Recap

We continue our summer series of studies in the Book of Joshua, which we have titled “The Jesus of the Old Testament.” We are not talking about the Jesus with whom we are all familiar: the Savior of the world, who is the sole focus of the entire New Testament. Bible scholars rightly point out how that Jesus is actually found in His pre-incarnation work sprinkled throughout the Old Testament. But there is only one Jesus of the Old Testament—meaning only one prominent person shares His name. Our English name Jesus, pronounced Yeshua in the time of the New Testament, was the equivalent of the name Joshua in ancient Hebrew. So it is **Joshua**, the successor of Moses and the great leader of the conquest of the Promised Land, on whom we are focusing this summer.

In our last installment we watched as God worked an amazing miracle on behalf of Joshua and his people. He blocked the Jordan River (a fast-moving and dangerous obstacle at flood stage), allowing the entire army of the Israelites to cross over on dry land. The people then celebrated that amazing victory by setting up a monument to record for future generations what had happened there.

Joshua 5

The anxious Canaanites and Amorites, the idol-worshiping and morally bankrupt people who lived in the Promised Land, watched the spectacle of the crossing of the Jordan with, as George W. Bush would say, “shock and awe.” We pick up the action in chapter 5.

When all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings who lived along the Mediterranean

coast heard how the LORD had dried up the Jordan River so the people of Israel could cross, they lost heart and were paralyzed with fear because of them.

Joshua 5:1

This sudden fear, indecision and hesitation were completely out of character for these violent warlords. Their instinctive response would have been to mobilize their troops and attack Israel immediately. If they'd done so they would have held tactical advantages: not only were their soldiers and weapons superior, but the Israeli army had its back to a swollen river with no avenue for retreat. It was especially critical that the Canaanites—the enemy—be paralyzed into inaction because of what God was about to do next.

At that time the LORD told Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise this second generation of Israelites.”³ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the entire male population of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth.

⁴Joshua had to circumcise them because all the men who were old enough to fight in battle when they left Egypt had died in the wilderness. ⁵Those who left Egypt had all been circumcised, but none of those born after the Exodus, during the years in the wilderness, had been circumcised. ⁶The Israelites had traveled in the wilderness for forty years until all the men who were old enough to fight in battle when they left Egypt had died. For they had disobeyed the LORD, and the LORD vowed he would not let them enter the land he had sworn to give us—a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷So Joshua circumcised their sons—those who had grown up to take their fathers' places—for they had not been circumcised on the way to the Promised Land. ⁸After all the males had been circumcised, they rested in the camp until they were healed.

⁹Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the shame of your slavery in Egypt.” So that place has been called Gilgal [which sounds like the Hebrew word *galal*, meaning “to roll”] to this day.

Joshua 5:2-9

A Classic Blunder?

This is unbelievable. Any military strategist or general would be horrified and dumbstruck by what Joshua did. How could a commander cross into enemy-held territory, establish a tenuous beachhead, and then immediately and willfully cripple and incapacitate his entire army? What an absurd blunder! This would seem to be one of the biggest mistakes ever made.

Think about the classic blunders of all time. Historians will tell us that among the great **military** blunders are:

- The “Charge of the Light Brigade” in the Crimean War (when the British commander lost his entire cavalry in a foolish attack)
- General Custer’s Last Stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn
- Adolph Hitler’s refusal to retreat from Stalingrad, costing him his entire Sixth Army
- Argentina’s foolish invasion of the Falkland Islands

Among the great **business** blunders of our own times:

- “New Coke”
- The decision of Volkswagen and Audi to try to cheat on emissions tests by manipulating software

The classic **sports** blunders:

- The NFL lineman who picked up a fumble and ran it back the wrong way, giving the other team free points
- The Cleveland Cavaliers guard who dribbled around in the final seconds of their recent playoff game, forgetting that the game was tied, while LeBron James pleaded with him to pass or shoot

Joshua’s decision to do elective surgery on all his men as soon as they’d crossed the Jordan River could have ranked at the top of that list of classic blunders ... except that God was protecting them (by freezing their enemies with fear). And it was God’s idea, not Joshua’s, to do it.

When God Says “It’s Time!”

Circumcision was the traditional symbol that a male was part of the family of Abraham, the Jewish people. It had been central to the life of the people of Israel for centuries, practiced faithfully by every genera-

tion. **Until now.** When the people exited Egypt and headed towards the Promised Land, they paused. They put off doing what they should have done. All the male babies born during the 40 years of traveling through and camping in the Sinai Peninsula were not circumcised.

There were reasons and excuses for neglecting what they knew was right. They had procrastinated. But the time to procrastinate and delay was now over. God has said to them, "It's time."

We have seen throughout scripture and human history that the Lord sometimes uses deeply flawed people to accomplish His purposes. Sometimes He even uses unbelievers, or those who are living in temporary disobedience or rebellion. But our flaws and sins may get in the way of doing good. And they *always* prevent us from being all we could be. The task before Joshua and his people was so critical, so central to fulfilling the promise, that God requires them to first make things right with Him. His blessings and protection and power will not be theirs until they do what they've been putting off doing.

This holds a clear message and application for us. It is so easy to procrastinate doing what God wants us to do. We can always come up with lots of good reasons and excuses. We're too busy, we're tired, we're pre-occupied, nobody else around us is doing it, we're not sure how to do it, we're comfortable the way things are. Every one of us has fallen into the pit of procrastination at times. And the Lord may allow us to stay there for a time. But then circumstances change, and God whispers in our ears (as He did in Joshua's), "It's time!" —time to stop delaying and putting it off, time to act. Is it possible that someone here today has been stalling in doing what you know you should do, and you're hearing God's whisper to you: "It's time"?

A Special Passover

Let's continue our story. After the circumcision and a week or more to heal and recover, there's more to come as the people are camped on the west bank of the Jordan.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month. ¹¹The very next day they began to eat unleavened bread and roasted grain harvested from the land.

¹²No manna appeared on the day they first ate from the crops of the land, and it was never seen again. So from that time on the Israelites ate from the crops of Canaan.

Joshua 5:10-12

It is springtime, the season of the year for the highest of holy days and most sacred of ceremonies for the Jews. Although they had neglected the practice of circumcision, we assume they had continued to perform the rituals for the Passover celebration. A quick review: the Passover was equivalent to our Fourth of July. It was the Independence Day of the Jewish people, the day they stopped being slaves and became a nation. Woven throughout the Passover rituals are powerful symbols not only of what God did for them, but of what He would eventually do in the Person of the Son of God, the Messiah. It was not coincidental that the momentous events of the Christian faith occurred at Passover: the Last Supper (which was actually the celebration of the sacred meal, done by Jesus one day early), then the Crucifixion and then the Resurrection.

This particular Passover celebration recorded in Joshua 5 was highly significant, for it was the first one to be held within the borders of the Promised Land itself. But there is something else that occurred at that time. We are told that the daily provision of manna stopped immediately, because the people were now able to eat the fruit of the Promised Land.

A quick recap: in their travels through the Sinai Desert, there was very little food to scavenge—certainly not enough for a large group of people. The soil and the rainfall were inadequate for sowing and harvesting crops. So God Himself became their food delivery source. Every morning (except the Sabbath Day) a layer of nutritious food was spread across the ground like dew. They scooped it up, baked it, and it sustained them. They didn't have to plant, weed, water or harvest: it was given to them directly by God, like a pizza delivery guy pulling into their driveway every day.

What happens the day after the Passover is that "Plan B" ends and the people return to "Plan A." Let me explain. "Plan B" was that, in a time of extraordinary circumstances, God would meet the needs of His people through miraculous means. But "Plan A," His usual intention, is that His people will be able to provide for themselves through natural means:

their own labor and skill and efforts. And with their arrival in the fertile and lush Promised Land from the inhospitable desert, the need for miracles was removed. They could now do things in the ordinary way.

There are times in our lives when we find ourselves in a tough spot. Maybe we are in a circumstance where we are up against it financially, or our health is in jeopardy, or some other crisis confronts us. In those times the people of God seek His intervention. And often God does step in.

I cannot count how many times I have seen, in my own life and that of my congregations, that God's supernatural provisions were there in the nick of time. I cannot count how many people have experienced healings, or the strength needed to endure, or financial and material help. It is appropriate that we ask God for His "Plan B" help in emergencies. But most of the time God provides for us through the normal means—what I call "Plan A"—when we can operate with a level of self-sufficiency. His normal intent is that we provide for our needs and those of our family and loved ones through the means He has provided to us: our intelligence and skill, our hard work and discipline, our saving and careful management, our attention to healthy living and to medicine and other help available to us. His purpose for us is not only that we might live and prosper, but that we might also have extra to share generously with others and support His work in the world.

It was an amazing experience for the people of Israel to, in effect, be on "God's Welfare Program" for those 40 years. But for their own benefit, and the benefit of future generations, such direct dependency had to come to an end. The same principle holds in every generation. When dependency is allowed to continue, it is destructive. A 29-year-old still living free of charge at "Hotel Mom and Dad" with no initiative to get a job or become independent and self-sufficient is a sad perversion of God's plan. So are people who are able to work but choose to remain on government assistance or dependent on the charity of others. And so are people who surrender to addictive behaviors that ruin their health and productivity and make them burdens to our health care system and their families.

Seeking God's intervention in times of need, when we could not avoid our situation nor get out of it on our own, is absolutely appropriate for a

believer. But moving to “Plan A” of personal responsibility and drawing on the resources God has provided should always be our desire and goal.

A Divine Encounter

The final portion of chapter 5 of Joshua describes one more fascinating incident. Let’s read verses 13-15.

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and demanded, “Are you friend or foe?”

¹⁴“Neither one,” he replied. “I am the commander of the LORD’s army.”

At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. “I am at your command,” Joshua said. “What do you want your servant to do?”

¹⁵The commander of the LORD’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did as he was told.

Joshua 5:13-15

Before he heads into his first critical battle at the lead of his Israeli forces, General Joshua has a personal encounter with his Supreme Commander. This powerful and holy figure appearing before him could have been the Archangel Michael, described elsewhere in scripture as the leader of the spiritual forces; or it could even have been God the Son Himself taking on human form (in which case we would have here the only occasion of the New Testament Jesus interacting directly with the Old Testament Jesus).

The importance of this spiritual experience for Joshua was two-fold. First, it was an experience comparable to that which his great mentor Moses had more than four decades earlier. At that time, Moses saw a bush burning in the desert, but the fire didn’t consume it. Approaching this strange phenomenon, a voice told him to remove his sandals, because he was standing on holy ground. That encounter with God was the turning point of Moses’ life. And here in Joshua 5 we find the same command in verse 15: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” A person who is going to attempt great things for God needs to know deep down in his or her bones how great God is.

The second purpose of this encounter: the Angel—or the Son of God Himself—corrects and redirects Joshua’s natural human orientation. Joshua wants to know in verse 13 if this mighty warrior standing before him is on his side or the enemy’s side. But his instinctive partisanship is sternly rebuked. Abraham Lincoln, during the dangerous days of the Civil War, was asked by a journalist if he believed God was on the side of the Union in its fight with the Confederacy. Lincoln replied (in a way that Joshua could have after his divine encounter): “The question is not, ‘Is God on our side?’ The question is, ‘Are we on God’s side?’”

We humans are so partisan, so prone to choose sides and divide between Us and Them. Look at what we do in our politics: each side circles its wagons. Each side lobbs its verbal grenades at the other. Each sees events only through their own lenses; each claims their own righteousness while piously branding the other as evil. But here’s the reality: God is on nobody’s side. He’s neither a Republican nor a Democrat. He’s not American or Chinese. None of us own Him or have the franchise on Him. He is greater than all of us. And He will judge all of us on the basis of how faithfully we follow Him.

The important question is: Are we on God’s side? Sometimes we stray and need to be corrected. Sometimes we’re blinded by our prejudices and bias and need our eyes to be opened. In our politics, and in our conversations, let’s be humble and gracious towards one another, rather than arrogant and critical. Let’s recognize that we’re all limited, and that we all need God’s grace to find our way to His side. ■

