

Preparing to Prosper

Joshua 5

Israel has entered into the land of promise and now prepares for conquest. The failings of the previous generation will not deter God's mission to bless His people and fulfill His promises.

Summary of the Text

When the Amorite and Canaanite kings hear about Israel crossing the Jordan River their hearts melt (v. 1). The Lord instructs Joshua to circumcise Israel a second time because though the generation living in Egypt had been, those born in the wilderness had not (vv. 2-5). The wilderness generation perished because they did not obey the voice of the Lord who swore He would not show them the land though He had sworn to give "a land flowing with milk and honey" to their fathers (v. 6). So Joshua follows through and circumcises them. They heal and the Lord says, "This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you," naming that place Gilgal (vv. 7-9). Israel then celebrates Passover and eats the fruit of the land. Manna ceases, swapping the miraculous provision for the more common one (vv. 10-12). Joshua approaches Jericho, perhaps on a scouting mission, and beholds a man with a sword drawn who says He is the commander of the Lord's army (v. 13). So Joshua falls before Him, worships, and asks for instructions (v. 14). He commands him to take off his sandal because the ground is holy, and Joshua obeys (v. 15).

Fear in the Land

Rahab already told the spies how the hearts of the Jerichoites melted when they heard Yahweh parted the Red Sea and the Israelites destroyed the Amorite kings, Og and Bashan (Josh. 2:10-11). Now word of crossing the Jordan gets out and all the Canaanite kings' hearts melt and their spirit is no longer in them (v. 1). Chapter 5 is a transition between crossing and conquering, and just by being faithful to this point, the Lord already destabilizes their enemies. The Canaanites should be afraid, and if they were wise, they'd turn from ungodly to godly fear. Fear is inescapable. Perfect love casts out fear, the fear that has to do with punishment from God (1 Jn. 4:18). But this is because the believer has the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy one is understanding" (Prov. 9:10). The iniquity of the Amorites wasn't complete when God promised the land to Abraham (Gen. 15:16), but now it is, and they should be afraid. It's a blessing to Israel that they are. People refuse to come to Christ because they're afraid—afraid of losing control, afraid of what obedience would mean for their lifestyle and relationships, afraid of their sins being exposed. All these precious choke trust in the living God. Christians can also have ungodly fears based on what Canaanites think—and what they fear. They're afraid of just laws based on Scripture, of free speech and free markets, of the gospel of grace being freely proclaimed and believed. We need to not be afraid of their fear, but instead to fear the Lord.

Renewing Covenant & Removing Reproach

At Kadesh Barnea forty years earlier Israel refused to believe that God would take them into the "land flowing with milk and honey" and wanted to pick a new leader to take them back to Egypt and stone Joshua and Caleb for believing (v. 7; Num. 14:3-4, 8-10). Given this rebellion, it's not surprising they didn't circumcise their kids because this is what circumcision means: God is in covenant with you and your descendants; He will give you the land and be God to your descendants too; so circumcise your sons on the eighth day and everyone who joins your people; to refuse to do this is to break covenant (Gen. 17:7-14). Though the wilderness generation didn't believe that God would bless them and their children, His grace continued to His people. We could say the faith of Moses, Joshua and Caleb carried to the next generation. God's two oaths are mentioned in verse six. He swore to the disobedient generation that they would not see the land, the

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same land which we swore to give to the fathers. Then Joshua circumcised them (v. 7). Circumcised flesh is an outward sign of a circumcised heart: “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer” (Deut. 10:16). The Lord tells His people to believe the promises and put the sign of the promises, of His covenant, upon their children, and when they did so this “rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” (v. 9). When the wilderness generation rebelled against the Lord, He said that He would strike them with pestilence, disinherit them, and raise up a greater and mightier nation from Moses (Num. 14:12). Moses responded that if He did this, the Egyptians would hear of it and say, “Because the Lord was not able to bring this people to the land which He swore to give them, therefore He killed them in the wilderness” (Num. 14:16). This persuades the Lord: “I have pardoned, according to your word; but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord” (Num. 14:20-21). In one generation we see the sign without faith, and in the next generation faith without the sign—until the Lord intervenes. So today you can have baptism (and all that goes with it) without faith. And you can have people professing faith without being baptized. God said to keep them together. Israel has crossed over, received the sign of the covenant to trust in the Lord and not themselves, and so the reproach that God would not bless and deliver His people is rolled away—joy at Gilgal (vv. 8-9). Circumcision is no longer a sign of the covenant, but we are “also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col. 2:11-12). Baptism marks us in God’s covenant and as heirs with Christ of the world.

Relying on Christ

Israel comes through the Jordan into hostile territory with armed men ready for battle (4:13). The previous reasons Israel cited for the rebellion in the wilderness—big people and big cities—are still true (Num. 13:28, 32). They’re just not good reasons for unbelief. Is this a good time to be circumcised (cf. Gen. 34)? How about for a nation-wide festival? Getting circumcised, observing Passover, trusting and rejoicing in the Lord are biblical disciplines borne of faith. To a heart of unbelief, Israel is a sitting duck. To a heart of faith, she prepares for prosperity by obeying the Lord. Old Testament theophanies occur when the Lord appears to men. We know He appears here because Joshua falls down and worships Him. When Cornelius falls down before Peter and John before an angel, both are told to get up and not worship fellow servants (Acts 10:25-26; Rev. 19:10). But this is the Lord, a pre-incarnation visit of the second person of the Trinity. He has His sword out because He will fight for Israel. His presence transforms the blood-soaked and defiled land into holy ground, and so Joshua knows he will be victorious. If God is for us, who can be against us? If we are baptized into Christ, dead to sin and alive to God, how can we let sin reign? If we have the Lord’s Supper and the blessing of the Spirit upon the preached gospel and the work of our hands, how can anything keep us from discipling the nations and prospering in the earth? This is how the New Testament teaches us think. We have been given much more than they had, so we should be more humble, more faithful, more hopeful for all God will do (1 Cor. 10:1-10; Heb. 3-4, 12:18-29).