

Joshua: Ouch!

Joshua 5:1-11

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Imagine that you were some great military leader preparing your men for battle in the hours that follow. How would you go about it? Stonewall Jackson prayed with his men. Henry V, before the battle of Agincourt, walked amongst them and spoke words of courage, rallying them to "stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood." You may remember the great scenes of battle in *Braveheart* and how William Wallace prepared his men. Most leaders advise that men who fight in a battle need a period of rest and refreshment prior to the fight.

Or perhaps, we should think of the preparations of the first (and what was thought to be the only) battle of the Civil War, Bull Run (or Manassas, as the confederates called it), as the Union forces advanced from Washington to Richmond, Virginia and had to pass through Manassas. The Union soldiers (about 35,000 men) were led by Irvin McDowell, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Mexican War, who turned out to be less able than the claims made about him, and General P.G.T. Beauregard, who commanded the 22,000 Confederate soldiers. It was in this battle that Stonewall Jackson was to emerge as a hero.

The battle had been in preparation for weeks, perhaps months. Folk came down from Washington with picnic baskets in order to watch it. Many thought the "war" would be won or lost by the outcome of this one battle.

How did these men prepare. Most of them were 90-day volunteers, who were growing fed up with waiting around in the heat of summer. They went over the plans, the strategy of how they saw the battle, looking at maps, making sure that lines of command were working well. They would write letters to loved ones, pray, rest.

The whole story that now unfolds is in many ways an astonishing one, not least because of the way this conquest of the land of Canaan is engaged in, for what happens here is, from a purely militaristic way, suicidal. It is hard to imagine anything better calculated to incapacitate an entire army of men than this act of circumcision that takes place on the western side of the river Jordan. Everything

about it is designed to point out to us that God's ways are not our ways. It is designed to emphasize the Lord's sovereignty in this conquest; that the battle is to be fought, not as an example of ethnic group dispossessing another of their land, as happens again and again. Rather, what is taking place here is in many ways, a holy *jihad*, a conquest based upon divine assessment that the Canaanites had used up their allowance of God's patience. That, as Amos was to let Israel know centuries later, for three transgressions and for four God comes and visits with divine punishment.

There is a limit to divine patience, and the Canaanites had reached it: the iniquity of "the Amorites was full" and the cup of God's wrath was to be poured out, using the Israelites as the instruments of his holy *jihad* against Canaan. But they dare not enter this battle in any other way but in the strength of the Lord Almighty. They were never to forget that they were the covenant people of God.

Three features of that relationship are now emphasized in this chapter as it describes for us the preparation of the people of God for battle.

First, is the demoralization of the enemies of God (v.1).

Second, is the consecration of the army of God (vv.2-10)

Third, is the provision for the people of God (vv.11-12)

I. First, is the demoralization of the enemies of God (v. 1).

In many ways, what is told us here is for our benefit, rather than for the benefit of the men now preparing for battle. This is to some extent an editorial comment made for us to appreciate what is going to happen in the next few chapters. God's intervention in the form of the drying up of the river Jordan had caused the hearts of the enemies of God to melt. They lost heart. Their morale was shaken by this intervention.

It is doubtful if the men on the western shores of the Jordan near Jericho were even aware of the intentions of the Amorite and Canaanite kings. This part of the story is written after the fact in order to tell us, as we now read the tale, that God was, in fact, going before them, opening up a way for these untrained and amateur soldiers to conquer the land of Canaan. God was blazing a trail for them to follow. What is happening here is a glimpse that the conquest of Canaan is something God brings about, that the *promise that God had made is going to be fulfilled*. I am sure that these Israelite men were surprised as to how little resistance they met as they crossed over the Jordan, that they were not met with anything like the forces that greeted, say the British and Americans whenever they crossed over from Kuwait into Iraq during the war that followed the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990.

There was in fact nothing! Not a single soldier met them. No hostilities blocked their path toward Jericho. Why not? Because the Lord had gone before them and had melted the hearts of the opposition. What we have here is something of the signal nature of what will be the explanation for this conquest in its entirety: God gave them victory. The battle was not theirs, but the Lord's. They could no more crow over their military exploits and victories than we can boast about our salvation. It is God's doing.

But this is only a prelude to a more important part of the story:

II. Second, is the consecration of the people of God (vv. 2-11).

It's hard to exaggerate the shock of verse 2, to Joshua as military commander, and to the men who now have to undergo this procedure. "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites *again* (Hebrew: *a second time*). The practice had fallen into neglect—all those 40 years and younger had not been circumcised (vv.4-7). There had been a hint of it in the wilderness period in the incident with Moses and his wife Zipporah and their son (Exod. 4).

And the effect of this is related in verse 8: they needed time to heal!

Now, do I need to spell this out? I hope not! My British reserve is shouting to me, "Stop!" These were grown men, not little children. The entire procedure would incapacitate them for several days (to say the least!). This was militarily disastrous. It placed them wide open to attack. Had this happened on the *eastern* side of the Jordan it might have been a little better; at least then they would have the shelter of the Jordan in full flood to protect them from surprise attacks by the Canaanites. But here, on the *western side* it makes no sense at all. It is suicidal and foolish.

So why did God tell Joshua to do this?

First: Circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. I put it like that because it's often suggested by some that circumcision was first and foremost a badge of national identity. It's what marked out the Jews from other races in the Middle East. Now, in fact, this is quite untrue. The Egyptians, for example, practiced circumcision. But why would anyone want to make this point at all?

What is the significance of saying, circumcision is what marks out your Jewishness? Partly, because there are some who want to downplay its spiritual importance and that because of the implications it has for its relationship to baptism. In Colossians 2:11 and again in Romans 4:11-12, Paul makes the point that circumcision and baptism point to the very same spiritual reality: they are both of them signs and seals of God's covenant of grace with His people. The

point being that since, in the case of circumcision, the sign and seal was applied to children (specifically, male children eight days of age), baptism as the bloodless sacrament of the new covenant ought also to be applied to children.

You have to go back to Genesis 17:10: "This is My covenant... every male among you shall be circumcised...Verse 11: "it shall be a sign of the covenant between you and Me..."

The rite of circumcision pointed to and confirmed the promise that God had made, a promise that included the conquest of the land of Canaan, as well as the promise that God had made to be their God (Gen. 17:8). It was a sign of something physical and temporary, the land of Canaan, but also of something eternal and enduring—their relationship with God and the enduring 'land' of the Canaan which is to come of the eternal city of the New Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth. Circumcision pointed to their union and communion with God as much as it did to the land of Canaan as God's gift to them. As such, Genesis 17 is very clear indeed: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant" (Gen. 17:14).

Do you see why Paul calls it, "a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was yet uncircumcised" (Rom 4:11). It is not a seal of Abraham's response, but to something God gave him and which Abraham received by faith. It was a sign and seal of the gospel. Of justification by faith, of the forgiveness of sins, of adoption, of union and communion with Christ, of perseverance and holiness, of the promise of eternal life.

Circumcision pointed to their identity as the Lord's covenant people. That God had made promises to them and they had entered into that covenant. Failure to be circumcised indicated that they were going it alone, they were attempting to occupy the land in their strength.

Circumcision is one of a number of covenant signs and symbols:

Noah—*rainbow* Abraham—*circumcision* Moses—*Sabbath Day* (Exodus 31) and the *Passover* David—*throne* (Psalm 89)

New Covenant—*Baptism and the Lord's Supper*

What is at stake is the promise that God has made (Josh 5:6).

Martin Luther, whenever he was tempted to sin by Satan, would refer to his baptism, saying, "*Baptismus sum*"—I am a baptized man! It wasn't that Luther believed in some sacramental power inherent within baptism itself. Indeed, Luther violently repudiated any notion of an *ex opera operato* power of the sacraments. But he did believe that baptism pointed to certain promises and

assurances that God had made to "whosoever believed in Jesus Christ" as their Savior.

In the same way, these men of Israel must swear their allegiance to be the Lord's people who are depending utterly upon the Lord for salvation and deliverance by acceding to the rite of circumcision. In that way, it was a sacrament of consecration. In it they were set apart to be the Lord's people, to live out and out for Him.

Latin word *sacramentum* —not a particularly felicitous term (it is better to look at Bible words). It points to the oath of allegiance that a Roman soldier might have given, the pledge if you like. And it is to this that *The Westminster Confession* points in 17:i (printed on your evening worship guides) whenever it says of sacraments that they "put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world." These soldiers must conquer Jericho by means that distinguish themselves as the Lord's people. As soldiers, they must be seen to be the Lord's soldiers! How astonishing that is! That "holiness unto the Lord" is to mark their fighting! There is nothing unsacred! Nothing! We are always the Lord's people no matter what we are doing.

Second: *circumcision was necessary for another reason: so that they might celebrate the other sacrament, Passover* (v.10). There had been no celebration of the Passover for 39 years! The last time they had partaken of the Passover was at Mount Sinai. The sacrament which reminded them of how God had brought Egypt to its knees and how He had delivered them across the Red Sea, as a prelude to what now lies before them—the occupation of Canaan. Thirty-nine years of wanderings have passed, due to their sin and unbelief, but now they must remember again. The God of battles is with them.

God had delivered them from Egypt through sacrifice and substitution and satisfaction of a lamb's life offered in their place. Just as we now do, as those baptized in Jesus' name, in whom the realities of what baptism has promised have been evidenced in a life of faith, love and obedience, and we drink of his blood and eat his flesh, symbolized in wine and bread at the Lord's Table. There we remind ourselves of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will yet do. We eat and drink in His presence, so that nourished by His Spirit we pledge ourselves to be the Lord's and wait, 'till He comes' for the new heavens and the new earth. As we traverse this interval between the two 'comings' of Jesus, in this age when the age to come has already broken through, and our lives are hid with Christ in God, we find daily strength to cope with life's hardships, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" by fellowship with Christ who is our Prophet, Priest and King.

Every step we make, we make because He has gone before us. His life has been poured out in death, His soul has borne the anger of a just God against sin, His resurrection has pronounced the victory.

"Do this in remembrance of me" Jesus said whenever He inaugurated the Lord's Supper. It is interesting that one of the things Moses had told the people on the plains of Moab, just before he died and before they set out to cross the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua, was the instruction "Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:11). And a solemn warning was added: "If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed" (Deut. 8:19).

Every fall in Britain, there is a ceremony held on a Sunday morning at 11.00 am at local cenotaphs or war memorials. Poppy wreaths are laid in memory of the fallen who died on the Fields of Flanders where, it is said, poppies were in abundance. It is a ceremony that remembers the fallen of all wars, but especially of the Great War and the Second World War, but also more recent deaths. It is now a part of the tradition that a two minute silence be held, when folk stand to attention and at the end of which the words of the poet, Laurence Binyon, are recited from a poem entitled *For the Fallen* which he wrote in 1914.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

The problem is that my generation, and those of my children were not alive in either of these wars, and the memory of them does not exist. Each year, the number who attend these memorials get fewer and fewer and there are voices which call for its end. But there are those, and I am one of them, that thinks that we should never forget what men did for the sake of liberty and freedom, the millions who lost their lives in battle. It is all too easy to forget the cost of freedom and in forgetting, repeat the errors of the past.

In just the same way, we can forget what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

King of my life I crown Thee now,
Thine shall the glory be;
Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow,
Lead me to Calvary.
Lest I forget Gethsemane,
Lest I forget Thy agony,
Lest I forget Thy love for me,
Lead me to Calvary.

III. Third, is the provision for the people of God (vv. 11-12)

I don't want to say much about this except that this is a beautiful statement of

how life in this world is meant to be lived.

They are taught to live by partaking of the produce of ordinary providence rather than that of miraculous providence. It was time for them to stop depending on miracles and divine intervention in the course of things. They must work for their food and eat the produce of their labors asking the Lord to bless it.

Unleavened bread and roasted grain may not sound like much, but it's a token of what is to come. God has brought them into the land and they can now eat from its produce. No longer will they eat manna to be gathered on a daily basis (except for the Sabbath). God has kept His word. He will provide for them. His word has come true. They have pledged themselves to be His, and He is keeping his word of promise to them. Not a single day had gone by when the manna did not arrive (except the Sabbath day—there was double provision on the eve of the Sabbath for that necessity). Not a single day! Because that is what the faithfulness of God is like. Not a single day will He neglect our welfare and our good.

What is it saying to us? Simply this: that God will take of us till we reach the Canaan which is to come. You think I am spiritualizing this passage? Then go home and read Hebrews 4 and the Sabbath rest which is yet to come which Joshua was not able to give us! Every step of the way, His faithfulness will follow us.

Every step!

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