

Consecration Before Conquest

Joshua 5

One of my favorite movies is “The Miracle.” This 2003 film depicts the 1980 victory of the U.S. Hockey Team against the Soviet Union Team in the Lake Placid Winter Olympic Games. This victory was so amazing as the United States team was made up of a bunch of amateur players; whereas, the Soviet team was made up of professionals who had been playing together for years and had the reputation of completely dominating their opponents.

One scene in this movie depicts a player in practice doing what he was used to doing in college hockey. He moves the puck coast to coast, from one end of the ice to the other, and scores a goal without passing the puck to his teammates. He expects, of course, to receive praise from the coach for his valiant effort. He thinks he can jump right in, play the game as he is used to playing it, and that this will be all that is needed for victory. He doesn’t get the response he was hoping for. The coach, Herb Brooks, scolds him. Brooks demands his players set aside the tactics they were used to and that they learn a totally different approach to the game of hockey. The methods Brooks uses to prepare his team are often puzzling to fellow coaches and players alike, but they prove to be the key to the success of the U.S. hockey team against Russia.

Israel’s situation after crossing the Jordan is similar. How? The preparation for battle that God calls for is very different than Israel might have expected. It is extremely unconventional. Just the same, this preparation proves to be critical for Israel to inherit the land as God promised.

God demonstrated His power on Israel’s behalf by causing the waters of the flooding Jordan to stand in a heap so that His people could cross on dry ground. As the Israelites were crossing the Jordan, the Canaanites were watching. They are afraid—their hearts are melting in fear and they no longer have the courage to face the Israelites.” Time to attack-Right?! Wrong!

From a human point of view, this was the perfect time to rush in and attack. However, God has Israel delay their attack. God’s timing is often not our timing. God’s ways are infinitely higher than ours and are often not what we would have expected them to be. Instead of attacking right away, Israel needs to complete some unfinished business. There are necessary spiritual preparations that must take place prior to Israel’s first battle in the Promised Land. Consecration of God’s people must come before their conquest of the land.

Unconventional Battle Preparations:

Circumcision of God’s people needs to be reinstated (3:2-9)

The Command (3:2-3)

God commands all of the males of Israel to be circumcised. Israel is a short distance from Jericho. Why can't circumcision wait until Israel has their first battle under their belt? Why is circumcision so important to Israel's spiritual preparation at this point? We ask, "Why now?"

The Need (5:4-7)

Circumcision was a sign of Israel's covenant relationship with God

God told Abraham that the fulfillment of the covenant promises He made to Israel was contingent upon their maintaining the sign of the covenant He established which was circumcision. While God's covenant to Abraham and to Israel is an unconditional, everlasting covenant, their experience of the blessings promised by the covenant are based on their obedience. Anyone not circumcised was to be cut off from God's people and would be excluded from the promises.

Genesis 17:9-14- "Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Before Israel can claim the land God promised them, they must first identify with the LORD by the sign of the covenant

The previous generation of Israel had all been circumcised. However, because of that generation's disobedience, all those who were of military age when Israel left Egypt died in the desert (except for Joshua and Caleb). God promised that these men would not see the Promised Land and in fact none of them did. While all of these men who died were circumcised, none of the sons that the LORD raised up in their place were circumcised. The practice of circumcision was suspended during the forty years Israel wandered in the desert and needed to be reinstated. Israel isn't ready to proceed in battle until they have obeyed God in circumcision and thereby identified themselves with the LORD as His people. Again, this was a necessary condition for their enjoying the promises of the covenant—one of those being the inheritance of land.

The faith of God's people (5:8)

Circumcision was a painful process. The men had to remain in their camp for several days to give them time to heal. The perceived vulnerability of their situation is illustrated by the killing

of all of the Shechemites by Jacob's sons while they were healing from circumcision (Genesis 34). From a human perspective, this is a bad time and place for this procedure. While camped near enemy walls, the entire army would be incapacitated for several days. What if the Canaanites attack during this time?

As is often the case, obedience to God puts His people in a position in which they feel vulnerable. Just the same, Israel submits and obeys the LORD'S command, trusting Him to protect them.

The effect of Israel's obedience (5:9)

As the result of Israel's obedience in circumcision, the reproach of Egypt was rolled away from Israel. What was the reproach of Egypt? Many believe that this refers to the taunts leveled by the Egyptians at the Israelites for their failure to gain their promised land. Another suggestion that has been made is that the shame of Israel's lust for Egypt was finally rolled away. Remember how Israel shamefully said again and again that they would rather be back in Egypt than to be where God had led them (Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:4-9). When Israel obeys God in circumcision and moves on in faith, their shame is removed.

It's time for battle, right? Not yet!

The Passover needs to be celebrated (5:10-12)

With circumcision accomplished, the people are spiritually ready and qualified (See Exodus 12:48) for the observance of the Passover. Israel's celebration of the Passover at this time was only the third Passover the nation had observed. The first was in Egypt the night before their exodus. The second was on the first anniversary of their departure from Egypt (Numbers 9).

The Passover celebration served as a reminder of God's presence, provision, and protection of Israel in the past. On the final night Israel was in Egypt, the Israelites sacrificed a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts of their dwellings. When the angel of death came over the land, he passed over the houses of the Israelites with blood on their doorposts, but he killed the firstborn sons of all of the Egyptians who of course did not have blood on their doorposts. This was the final straw for Pharaoh who finally let Israel, his slave labor force, go. God's powerful work delivered His people from the hand of the Egyptians. God established the Passover as a lasting ordinance to be celebrated for generations to come in memory of Israel's deliverance from the plague of death and their exodus from Egypt.

When Israel remembered God's powerful deliverance of them from the hands of the Egyptians—a powerful world empire—it would serve as good preparation for their trusting Him to give them victory over the Canaanite giants as well.

It's significant to note God's precise timing here. Exodus 12:25 says, "When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony." God anticipated they would observe Passover upon their entrance to the Promised Land and they did!

The day after their Passover celebration, Israel ate some of the produce of the land and the manna that had been Israel's food supply for forty years stopped. Their stay in the wilderness is over and it is time for them to eat of the abundant supply in the Promised Land.

This meal of unleavened bread and roasted grain was a reminder of God's care, His provision, and His faithfulness to His promises. Just as they were able to count on Him for the supply of food they needed in the desert, they could trust Him for the abundant provisions He promised in the good land He was giving them (Deuteronomy 8:6-9).

Israel has crossed the Jordan river, obeyed the LORD in circumcision, celebrated the Passover, and eaten of the land, and now they are ready to charge ahead in battle! Right? Still wrong. Previous to the first battle in the land, God adds one more piece of important preparation for what is ahead.

The Commander of the LORD's army needs to be recognized and worshiped (5:13-15)

Joshua encounters a man with a drawn sword (13a)

As Joshua approaches Jericho, he looks up and finds himself standing face to face with an armed man in front of him who has His sword drawn. Not recognizing this man, Joshua instinctively questions Him as to His military affiliation.

Joshua questions the man as to which side he is on (13b)

Joshua presents two options in answer to his question. He wants to know if this man is on the side of Israel or that of Israel's enemies. If this man is on Israel's side, he has some explaining to do as Joshua didn't give orders for the soldiers to draw their swords. If he is on the enemy's side, Joshua is ready to fight.

The man gives a surprising answer- "Neither"-and introduces Himself as Commander of the LORD's army (14a)

The response Joshua receives is startling and revealing. The man flatly negates both of the options Joshua gave to him. The Commander's answer "neither" makes it abundantly clear that He isn't coming as a spectator, but as a fighter with drawn sword. He isn't there to take sides, but to take over. He isn't coming to fight for Joshua and Israel as an ally, but rather He intends to take charge.

It immediately occurs to Joshua that this is not a mortal soldier. Anyone qualified to identify Himself as the Commander of the LORD's army is certainly superior to Joshua. Joshua realizes right away that he is not in charge, but the Commander of the LORD's army is.

Victory will come to Israel because the Commander of the LORD's army is fighting for Israel, not because of Joshua's efforts

Kenneth Gangel writes “When people invite you to their house for dinner, you do not dictate the menu. You don't ask them to cook this or that. You eat what they serve you or you don't eat at all. You come to eat the meal, but it is not really your meal. In the same way Israel approached God's promised land table as his guest. He would serve them, but he would also choose the menu and call the shots.”

The battle ahead isn't Joshua's, but the LORD's, and He will fight for Israel

Joshua responds by submitting to his Commander's authority and falling on his face in reverence before Him (14b)

Joshua's response of bowing facedown indicates his recognition at this point that the appearance of the man with drawn sword is an appearance of God—a theophany. This was an Old Testament pre-incarnate appearance of the LORD Jesus Christ. Recognizing His Commander's authority, Joshua asks Him for orders. Though Joshua might have expected a battle command, the LORD is concerned about holiness.

God's presence with Joshua converts their meeting spot into holy ground (15)

The Commander of the LORD's army informs Joshua that the place where they have met is holy ground. The scene here is reminiscent of the time when Moses was given instructions at the burning bush when God appeared to him. The declaration that this meeting spot is holy indicates that this messenger with drawn sword is God appearing as a man. The same God who appeared to Moses has appeared to Joshua. Just as He was with Moses, so He would be with Joshua.

Joshua's encounter with God communicates to him that God will be with Israel and will fight for them. This isn't Joshua's battle, but God's. Because the battle is the Lord's, they can go into Jericho with confidence.

God makes it clear that He is in charge and as we will see next week, the way the first battle of Israel goes down will communicate the same message—The battle is the LORD's. Just as Israel's preparation for battle here was rather unconventional, so will the first battle with Jericho be completely unconventional.

Application for us today:

Perspective: Victories are often followed by tests

As Scottish preacher Andrew Bonar used to say, “Let us be watchful after the victory as before the battle.” The Israelites crossed the Jordan river on dry ground—a victory. The Israelites were commanded to circumcise their men in enemy territory, a test of their faith. The tests God brings

aren't easy. Often, they put us in situations where we feel vulnerable to attack. Even so, we can trust God to take care of us in the midst of our most severe tests.

It's important for us to remind ourselves of what God has done for us in the past as it encourages us to trust Him in the present

Remembering what God has done for us in the past is important. This point is demonstrated by all of the reminders God gives to Israel in Joshua 4 and 5:

The 12 memorial stones remind Israel and their children of His great power in backing up the waters of the flooding Jordan River.

The sign of circumcision would remind them of God's unconditional covenant that He first gave Abraham.

The Passover celebration would remind them of God's sparing them of a horrible plague and delivering them from the hand of the Egyptians.

Remembering God's work on our behalf in the past is excellent preparation for the tests of the future. When our memory of what God has done fails, it tends to cause our trust in Him to falter. However, when our memory of what God has done is fresh, it will encourage us to trust him with the challenges that come our way.

It's not for us to claim God's loyalty to our cause, rather we need to acknowledge God's claim of us for His purposes

J. Hampton Keathley writes, "We tend to approach our battles and causes backwards; we turn things around and try to marshal God to support us rather than to submit and follow Him....God is not present to fight our battles or help in our causes or jump to our rescue when we get in trouble as though He were a genie in a bottle.....The battle is His and our role is that of soldier-servants: we are here to serve Him, to do His will, to follow Him and depend on Him completely."

In a meeting with a small group of missionaries in China, James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission reminded them that there were three ways to do God's work: "One is to make the best plans we can, and carry them out to the best of our ability...or, having carefully laid our plans and determined to carry them through, we may ask God to help us, and to prosper us in connection with them. Yet another way of working is to begin with God; to ask His plans, and to offer ourselves to Him to carry out His purposes." Joshua of course followed the third plan here. May we be careful to do the same.

Public victories are won in private as we submit to the LORD and receive His direction

There is no indication that anyone else was there when Joshua has his encounter with the LORD. Joshua's meeting with the LORD was private. May we, like Joshua, be faithful to respond to the LORD with submission and worship in private in preparation for public ministry. Let's not be in such a hurry to "get the show on the road." Before hurrying to a task or rushing into battle, let's "take our shoes off" and worship—let's slow down and acknowledge God's sovereign leadership of our lives—let's take time to be holy.

We are in the middle of a spiritual battle and need the LORD fighting our battle for us just as much as Joshua did

Our enemy, Satan, wants to distract us from the most important things, detour us away from the right things, and ultimately destroy us. In our battle against him and his demons, we will never win if we think we are in charge and can fight in our own strength. Defeat and failure will be ours if we have the attitude that we have things under control and can fight our own battles.

We need the LORD to fight for us and give us the victory. Victory comes from Him, not from within our own selves. If we are to experience the victory He gives, we need simply to acknowledge He is in charge and obey His revealed will just as Joshua did. As we look to our Commander to fight for us, we can trust Him to be present with us just as He was present with Joshua.