

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 2 – The Thrill of Victory & Agony of Defeat
Joshua 5-8

Introduction

Having entered the Promised Land, Israel will now seek to conquer the first two city-states, Jericho and Ai. They will painfully learn the lesson that *victory is contingent upon obedience to Yahweh*. There are also two very significant Covenant ratification ceremonies in this section. In ch.5 the entire 2nd generation of males will receive be circumcised, which was the sign of the Covenant between Yahweh and Abraham's descendants (see Genesis 17:9-14). In ch.8 the nation will renew their commitment to the Covenant as they stand between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim and have the Law read to them, along with the blessings and curses associated with obedience and disobedience; a ceremony previously outlined for them by Moses before his death (see Deuteronomy 27).

Circumcision and Passover: 5:1-12

The opening line tells us that the Canaanite kings were already in dread of Israel, having heard how God dried up the river Jordan for them to enter the Land. “. . . *their hearts melted, and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.*” While God was breathing strength and courage into Joshua and the sons of Israel (1:1-9), he was removing all strength and courage from the enemy.

Situations that appear to be huge mountains to us, can already be weakened by God before we are even aware of it. Therefore, when we have received our marching orders from God to move forward, it is important for us to move forward by faith, realizing that God has gone before us to prepare the way to victory.

The circumcision of the entire 2nd generation of males was an important Covenant renewal ceremony (Gen.17:9-14); but it also served other important functions at this point in Israel's journey. *Now when they had finished circumcising all the nation, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the*

reproach of Egypt from you.” So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day (5:8,9).

- The act of circumcision was a huge test of the *faith* of Joshua and his army. Consider the fact that they were now within the borders of the Land of Canaan, subject to attacks from other kingdoms. Yet, God asked Joshua to *disable the entire army* for many days, while the men healed from the act of circumcision. They knew from their own history how vulnerable they were during those days of healing. Recall the story in Genesis 34:18-21 when the sons of Israel attacked the city of Shechem *while they were recovering from the wounds of circumcision three days later!*

God often invites us into extreme faith-building tests where we are desperately dependent upon Him for His provision and protection. He ‘disables’ our normal defenses, and asks us to trust Him entirely. During these times we can learn sweet lessons about God trustworthiness, love and faithfulness. It is during these extreme seasons of testing that God most often shows up as a Father Who cares for the well-being of the children He so dearly loves. If you are in one of those seasons of life, make sure you spend plenty of time with Him, pouring out your heart to Him and receiving, in turn, His assurances of love, breathed through His Word, His Spirit and His people.

- Circumcision also indicated that the *shame* of Israel’s past bondage in Egypt was now being “rolled away.” Yes, a period of past slavery in Egypt would always be part of Israel’s story; but it no longer defined their *identity*. Now they were *the people of God, the bride of Yahweh*. They were no longer the people in bondage, the slaves of Pharaoh.

Regardless of our past identity, it is important for us to receive and fully appropriate our new identity as children of God through Jesus Christ. “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as His children by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:15-17). As with Rahab ‘the prostitute,’ so with all the sons and daughters of God: The past will always be part of our stories . . . but God can make the remaining chapters a testimony of His grace and power, as we daily surrender to Him.

Israel celebrated the annual Passover Feast for the first time in the Land, on the outskirts of the city of Jericho. They also ate some of the produce of the Land for the first time, as the manna from heaven suddenly ceased falling upon them.

“While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year” (5:10-12).

The Passover Feast required every family unit to commemorate God’s past act of delivering them from Egypt with a mighty hand. This solemn act of remembering would have given them great hope as they were camped just outside of the tightly walled city of Jericho, about to enter into their first battle to take the Land.

Joshua met by the Commander of the Lord’s Army: 5:13-6:5

Just as Moses was met by the Lord at the burning bush and required to remove the sandals from his feet (Exodus 3:5), so now Joshua is met by the commander of the Lord’s army, and required to remove his sandals from the ‘holy ground’ (5:15). It is clear from this encounter that the Lord was sending His armies to fight for Israel. They would *not* be going into these battles alone. Read 2Kings 6:15-17 for Elisha’s very similar vision of the Lord’s heavenly armies coming to fight for Israel.

Most scholars believe that this was an appearance of the Son of God, in pre-incarnate form (a “theophany”). The reasons are: 1) the “man” is given divine honors, as Joshua fell to the ground in worship. 2) He is called “the Lord” when he continues speaking (6:2). Recall a similar appearance of the Lord as one of three travelers who came to visit Abraham on the way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:2,20,22; 19:1). Given the fact that “no man has seen God (the Father) at any time,” (John 1:18), it is clear that all appearances of God in both Old and New Testaments are appearances of the 2nd Person of the Trinity, God the Son.

The Lord gave Joshua an unlikely battle plan for the defeat of Jericho:

“See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the

valiant warriors. You shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead" (6:2-5).

Joshua needed to know that he was not alone as he went into battle. He needed a "warrior God" to accompany him. Hagar, the Egyptian runaway maid (Genesis 16) needed a tender "seeing and hearing God" in her time of need. Moses needed a "miracle-working God of heaven and earth" in order to defeat the gods of Egypt and deliver Israel out of bondage. Peter, after denying Jesus three times, needed a "forgiving and restoring God." God is willing to come to each of us, in our time of need, just as we need Him. He can be a strong Father, a merciful Forgiver, a caring Shepherd, a wise Counselor, a tender Healer, a sympathetic High Priest, and so much more. What is your need right now? Whatever it is, God will come to you IF you are open to His visitation.

Victory at Jericho: 6:6-27

As instructed by the Commander of the Lord's army, the people of Israel marched around Jericho once a day for six days in a silent procession. The only sound was that of the priests blowing the shofar. On the seventh day they marched around the city seven times, still remaining completely silent *until* the Lord gave the command for all Israel to *SHOUT*.

"So the people shouted, and priests blew the trumpets; and when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted with a great shout and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight ahead, and they took the city" (6:20).

While the entire city was destroyed, Rahab the prostitute and her family were spared, as previously promised.

"So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and placed them outside the camp of Israel. They burned the city with fire, and all

that was in it. Only the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. However, Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho" (6:22-25).

Only precious metals were to be kept and devoted to the Lord's treasury (6:24). This note sets us up for the tragedy that is about to happen in the next battle. One man's sin will take the nation down.

Defeat at Ai: 7:1-26

"But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the Lord burned against the sons of Israel" (7:1).

It is a deep thought to ponder that one man, Achan, violated the ban on things taken from Jericho, yet, *God held "the sons of Israel" (the whole nation) responsible* for this sin. The whole nation was defeated at Ai because of one man's unfaithfulness!

"The men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water" (7:5).

Joshua, unaware of Achan's sin, complained to the Lord about this tragic defeat (7:6-9); but the Lord responded by telling him that there was sin in the camp (7:10-15). On the next day, the lot was cast and it eventually fell upon the family of Achan (7:16-21). He came forward and confessed his sin before all:

"Truly, I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I wanted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it" (7:20,21).

As a result, Achan and his entire clan were put to death in "Valley of Achor" (valley of trouble). God's hand of discipline was, therefore, removed from Israel. (Compare this story with that of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.)

In the case of Achan's sin, we see a very familiar pattern: "I SAW... I WANTED ... I TOOK." In the Garden of Eden, Eve SAW the fruit ... it was DESIREABLE ... and she TOOK it. King David SAW Bathsheba ... He INQUIRED about her ... then he TOOK her into his palace. James outlines the stages of temptation and sin similarly (see James 1:13-15). Aside from the impact upon our own lives, it is sobering to consider the collateral damage our sins wreak upon those around us. We sin – others suffer. It is a rule of life. This is one of the wise things we must learn to do when temptation appears in front of our eyes: We must weigh the costs of sin to ourselves and to those around us. While it is quite easy and tantalizing to imagine the immediate pleasures that will be ours because of an act of indulgence, it is much more difficult and necessary to sit and ponder the long-term implications of such a temporary indulgence. I SAW ... I COUNTED the cost ... I PASSED on sin's deadly offer.

Victory at Ai: 8:1-29

The sin having been rooted out of Israel, God gave them victory over the city-state of Ai. It is worth nothing that God gave to Joshua a *very different strategy* than the one given at Jericho.

“You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it” (8:2).

In the case of Ai, Joshua was to draw the army of Ai out of their city by pretending to flee in fear. Ai's army would chase Israel based on the misplaced confidence they had from their earlier success. Then, an ambush was to be set behind the army of Ai. In this way, Ai was completely defeated by Israel.

Yesterday's methods are not God's prescriptions for today's battles. God chooses different ways, in different seasons, to accomplish His will. This is why it is important at all times to be seeking the Lord, asking for discernment and guidance. Do not rely upon past successes and strategies for your way forward. Seek God specifically for the decisions, challenges and needs you have today.

The Law Read between Ebal and Gerizim: 8:30-35

Prior to his death, Moses instructed Israel as to a very important Covenant renewal ceremony once they were IN the Promised Land

(see Deuteronomy 27). They were to gather between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim and re-read the entire Covenant made between Yahweh and Israel. Representatives from six tribes on Mount Gerizim would then read the *blessings* associated with *obedience* to the Covenant. Representatives from six tribes on Mount Ebal would read the *curses* associated with *disobedience* to the Covenant. Joshua and all Israel followed exactly Moses prescription for this solemn ceremony of dedication.

Then Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron tool; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. He wrote there on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel. All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had given command at first to bless the people of Israel. Then afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them” (8:30-35).

Yesterday's commitments are not enough to carry us through today's competing agendas. There was a reason that God asked Israel to renew their vows to Him repeatedly (not only here, but also at annual festivals such as Passover, The Day of Atonement, the Feast of First Fruits, etc). Our hearts tend to wander even from the most sincere commitments made in the past. As the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every blessing" puts it: "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, O Lord and seal it; seal it for the courts above." Perhaps there is some past commitment that now needs to be renewed – a marriage commitment, a commitment to serve the Lord, a commitment to seek healing, a commitment to reconcile with someone. Ask God to show you if it is time to renew an important commitment.