

First Things First

Joshua #5 • February 1, 2026

Opening

My wife, Deb, leads a double life. Most days, she is the person you see on the stage or sitting in the front row beside me, engaging people in the Fellowship Hall, or delivering homemade chocolate chip cookies to friends. During the work week, she puts on scrubs and goes to work for a pediatric ophthalmologist, helping the doctor treat kids and making sure the office runs smoothly. This is the Deb I know. I see her every day. I have conversations with her. I help her make dinner. On Thursdays, I swing by her workplace and we have lunch together.

But the other Deb? She lives in a different world. On Wednesday and Friday AM, this Deb assists in surgery. She holds eye muscles while the doctor cuts and sews. She deals with blood and anesthesia. She tells me about this world sometimes. It is filled with people I never encounter, procedures I don't fully understand, and terms I barely understand ("bilateral resection of the inferior oblique muscle").¹ It also comes with these breath-taking looks I never see! [CUE PICTURE]

Why does this Deb look so different in the operating room than she does this morning? Well, I don't really understand that world (or want to), but I've picked up enough from her experience – along with watching a few medical dramas on TV – to know the look is related to the start of surgery.

- Surgery doesn't start in the OR with the first incision.
- Surgery doesn't start when the patient is put to sleep.
- The surgery starts before all that, when a surgical team "scrubs in."

The *scrub in* process is a critical step in surgical procedures, ensuring that the surgical team is free from microorganisms that might cause infection. The scrubbing process involves several key steps:

¹ I've heard all those words, but I'm not sure if I put them in the right order or if I just made up a horrific new procedure that will blind the patient

- **Preparation:** Remove all jewelry, ensure nails are clean and trimmed short, remove any accessories, tie hair back and put on a surgical cap to cover hair completely.
- **Hand Hygiene:** Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds, ensuring every part of the hands is cleaned, including under the nails and between fingers.
- **Scrubbing:** Use a water-based scrub with antimicrobial soap or an alcohol-based rub. Apply the antiseptic solution to the hands and forearms, extending up to approximately two inches above the elbow. Keep hands elevated above the elbows to prevent contaminated water from running back down the arms.
- **Drying:** Use sterile towels to dry the hands and forearms, starting from the fingertips and moving towards the elbows.
- **Gowning and Gloving:** Don a sterile surgical gown and pair of gloves to stay clean.

That's a lot of steps! But it explains why Deb looks so different.

If the goal is to **heal** a patient...to **restore** health...to **eliminate** disease... you must do **important things first** that will set you up for success! You must "*scrub in*" to be clean and clear of bacteria or other things that can cause infection.

That's how it works in surgery...or for your job...or for your favorite hobby...

*You must take care of the **first things first!***

Recap

And that leads us to today's sermon passage, where we are continuing to explore the book of Joshua.

We have been learning from Joshua (the Person) and his real-life example, to see how he embodied God's command to "*be strong and courageous.*" We want to see how he led others to serve the Lord.

Joshua (the Book) gives us great material to learn from. And so, we've seen **Joshua (the Person) be equipped by God** to lead the nation of Israel into the Promised Land, receiving God's commands and then immediately setting things in motion, preparing the people to cross the river and receive God's blessings. We saw **Joshua send in spies** to gain tactical information to help them accomplish what God had guaranteed. We heard from the

spies about a **woman in the city of Jericho (Rahab)** who risked it all to follow God (yes, it was worth it!). And last week, we followed the nation of Israel as they miraculously crossed the Jordan River when **God parted the waters** for them. We saw them set up **stone piles** as **reminders to remember** this amazing work of God!

Which brings us to today. As the people stand on the west side of the river, news of their crossing has quite an effect on the people who have already been living in Canaan.

“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, NLT)

Verse 1 is exciting, because the fear of the nations sets the stage for one of the best parts of the book. When I think about the story of Joshua, his upcoming conquest of the city of Jericho is probably the most memorable moment from the book. It is a dramatic display of God’s power, showing why those nations should be afraid! It is cool...and it has great theme music (“Joshua ‘fit’ the battle of Jericho...”). I *really* wanted to preach that part of the story today in chapter 6...

...but God’s word is just too full of good stuff to skip over! Before we get to the story of Jericho, we must read chapter 5. *This* is where we will be exploring today (open your Bibles and turn there now). Chapter 5 is all about **doing the first things first**. It is the **spiritual equivalent of scrubbing in**. Before God does His work of establishing the nation in this land, He wants and needs the people to be set up for success.

He wants them to be spiritually ready for the task at hand! **He wants them to do the first things...first.**

God expects some initial actions before the people move forward to Jericho.

Know Who You Are (Joshua 5:2-9)

The Sign of the Covenant

The first thing God wants the people to do is to **know who they are**.

Let's take a look at verses 2-9. (DISCLAIMER: Please know...it's going to be as awkward for me to read as it is for you to hear. "What?!" You'll find out)...

"At that time the Lord told Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise this second generation of Israelites." So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the entire male population of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. Joshua 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. Those who left Egypt had all been circumcised, but none of those born after the Exodus, during the years in the wilderness, had been circumcised. The 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. So 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. After all the males had been circumcised, they rested in the camp until they were healed. Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the shame of your slavery in Egypt." So that place has been called Gilgal to this day." (Joshua 5:2–9, NLT)

I'm going to stop right there and remind you of another verse.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right." (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT)

So, even if you think this Joshua passage is weird, trust me: this is God-inspired, useful stuff! Whenever we dig into Scripture, we find diamonds... and sometimes we have to work a little harder to get that diamond out of the dirt!

Today requires a little digging, all because of one big word: **circumcision**.

"*Circum*" is from the Latin for "around;" "*Cise*" is from the Latin for "cut." So, circumcision means to "cut around." But cut around what? If you know, you know. If you don't... sorry... I'm not doing a slide for that!

If you've been a Christian for a while, you know that the Bible brings up this word a lot more than we want to hear it. In **Deuteronomy 10:16**, God tells

the people to “*circumcise the foreskin of your heart.*” In **Exodus 6:30** Moses says that he is a man “*of uncircumcised lips.*” In **Jeremiah 4:4** Jeremiah complains that the people’s “*ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen...*” In **Philippians 3:3**, Paul claims that Christians “*are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.*”

The word shows up a lot! And the reason Bible writers keep going back to that word is because God made it a big deal about it centuries earlier! Circumcision was the symbol of God’s covenant with Abraham!

God makes a solemn vow in Genesis 17.

“... Then God said to him, “This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! What’s more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them! I will confirm my covenant with you and your descendants after you, from generation to generation. This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And I will give the entire land of Canaan, where you now live as a foreigner, to you and your descendants. It will be their possession forever, and I will be their God.”” (Genesis 17:3–8, NLT)

It’s an awesome promise! God commits to this plan! But as you read on, God says the following regarding Abraham’s role in the covenant:

“This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised.” (Genesis 17:10, NLT)

God will shower blessings and offspring and possessions; Abraham just needs to...ahem... “make the cut.”

And not just him. This is for every one of his offspring, servants, or foreigners who would join them:

“Any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for breaking the covenant.” (Genesis 17:14, NLT)

There is too much to unpack about this topic: what it means as a **sign**, why God would choose that **particular sign** (rather than a special haircut or

secret handshake), **who would know** about it, how it is **discussed in Scripture** and especially the **New Testament**, etc.

We won't have time today to explain it all. For now, set those questions aside. Just keep Genesis 17:14 in mind...

“Any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for breaking the covenant.” (Genesis 17:14, NLT)

...and then remember that Joshua is leading an *entire group* of people who have not fully identified with God's covenant.

- These are people who have been **following God**. Literally. They have traveled where God led; they have been guided through difficult times and places and been miraculously taken to this spot.
- They have been **sustained by God**. Literally. God has provided food for them, miraculously, on a daily basis (“manna from heaven”).
- They have been **taught by God**. Literally. The words God gave to Moses have been repeated to them as the commands and laws they should obey.
- They have been **blessed by God**. Literally. They stand on the inheritance promised to their people, camped for the first time in the Promised Land.

And all the while, this generation has **lived outside the covenant promises** of God because they did not bear the sign of the covenant on their bodies. They never took that step to identify with their people. They didn't do the *first things first* to claim their identity.

So here on this side of the river, at a place later called *Gibeath-haaraloth*,² God says, “It's time to put **FIRST THINGS FIRST**. Remember who you are! You need to be **MY** people before you do anything else in this land.”

It wasn't time to conquer a city when the people hadn't cemented their own relationship to Him.

First Things First

It's never time for His glory until He is your God. You've got to do the first things first!

² Dude. This literally means “hill of foreskins.” Lol. No translator wanted THAT rendering on their shoulders!

Church, today I want to be very clear. Some of you are in a similar boat.

- You have been **following God**. You show up at church and try to live by most of His rules
- You have been **sustained by God**. You have leaned on Him during times of need and desperation.
- You have been **taught by God**. You've listened to sermons and been in classes and read a few pages from a book of devotions.
- You have been **blessed by God**. He has provided for your needs and more, in every way you can think of.

But you've never taken on the sign of His covenant.

“Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God.”” (Acts 2:37–39, NLT)

Have you made the decision to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and received the sign of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit?

I'm glad that the signs of the new covenant involve fewer flint knives in sensitive places, but the decision to identify in Him must still be done! Putting **FIRST THINGS FIRST** when it comes to following Jesus is just as important! Are you in or out?!

It's not time for His glory in in your life until He is your God!

What does that mean?

- You **ADMIT** your sinfulness and need for a Savior
- You **BELIEVE** that Jesus is that Savior, that He is God's pathway to forgiveness and eternal life
- You **CONFESS** your faith in Him as Lord and Savior.
- You get **DUNKED** – immersed in water as a symbol and showcase of that decision, pointing to the death of the old you and a rising up to new life that foreshadows your future resurrection to eternal life!

Maybe you've thought about it but never acted.

Maybe your parents put you through a ceremony when you were a baby.

Maybe you are hearing about this for the first time today.

I just want to give you the opportunity to put **FIRST THINGS FIRST**. If you need Jesus, but you've never acted, repeat after me (and if you already have Jesus, repeat it with me too as a reminder of our identity)

*Lord, I admit I am a sinner.
I need and want Your forgiveness.
I accept Your death as the penalty for my sin,
I recognize Your mercy and grace as a gift
Not based on anything I have done,
But because of your love.
Cleanse me and make me Your child.
By faith I ask You into my heart
as the Son of God
and as Savior and Lord of my life.*

*(With heads still down, would you raise your hand if this is your first-time declaration, identifying with Him as Lord and Savior?
[Praise God! Come talk to me after service and let's take the next steps])*

In Your precious name we pray, Jesus... Amen!

***SIDE NOTE: God chooses the foolish things of this world to shame the wise. So, if anyone comes to Christ as a result of me talking about circumcision at the "Hill of Foreskins," that is all His doing!!!! ***

Know Who You Follow (Joshua 5:10-15)

After they lined up and had a few days of healing, God still wasn't ready for the people to take action in the land. There were other FIRST THINGS that needed to be done FIRST.

The Passover (5:10-12)

They needed to look to the past.

“While 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. The very next day they began to eat unleavened bread and roasted grain harvested from the land. No 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, NLT)

Only those who had the sign of the covenant were supposed to partake of this special ceremony that spoke of God’s actions in the past. But now (after “making the cut”) the whole community could. And they could remember and rejoice together.

In the same way, communion (for us) is a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus made. Only those who are part of the covenant are supposed to partake of it weekly...but those who do are reminded of who we follow!

The meals (old and new covenant) are a reminder God’s leadership and sacrifice. Before any church tries to do anything special for the Kingdom (whether a ministry, an event, an outreach, providing assistance), its members should be fully aware of God’s faithful action in the past so we remember it isn’t based on our own power.

We need to know Who to follow!

The Commander of the Lord’s Army (5:13-15)

We also need to look to the future.

Joshua had one more dramatic reminder in chapter 5 as he was challenged to put first things first.

“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?” “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?” The 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, NLT)

Out on his own, scouting out the town and considering his upcoming plan of attack, Joshua meets a “man” with a sword drawn.

Is he on our side or our enemies’ side?

“No. I command the Lord’s army.”

Joshua had a divine encounter here! This commander is the “Angel of the Lord” – a manifestation of God’s presence.³ And you don’t ask whether God is on YOUR side. You ask how you can be on HIS.

And that’s what Joshua does. He puts first things first! The city attack isn’t the top priority; obeying God is.

Joshua knows Who to follow in the moments, days, months and years to come! He needs to align His plans to God.

And so do we. Always.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”
(Hebrews 13:8, NLT)

Past, present, or future, we need to know who we follow.

Conclusion

Church, our mission is to do some big things in Tonganoxie.

- We get to heal hearts
- We get to pray for restored health
- We get to take care of needs
- We get to mend relationships
- We get to break chains
- We get to taste heaven
- We get to show forgiveness
- We get to demonstrate love
- We get to proclaim Jesus

³ Scholars disagree whether the **commander** was an appearance of God, the pre-incarnate Christ, or an angel. His reference to himself as **commander of the Lord’s army** might imply that he was an angel. However, he did not prevent Joshua from worshiping him, as angels usually did (e.g., Rev 22:8–9; cp. Acts 10:25–26). [New Living Translation Study Bible](#) (Jos 5:14). (2008). Tyndale, Inc.

But if we want to do any of those, we need to take a page out of the book of Joshua and do the **important things first** – the things that will set us up for success.

- **We need to know Who we follow** – going where He leads, remembering His faithful actions, not hoping He follows us.
- **We need to know who we are** – finding our identity in Christ as our Savior, taking the next steps to join Him and belong rather than staying on the fringes

If we want our church to thrive, those are the next steps! We need to take them before we try anything.

- Before we try to reach the community, we need to take it to God first.
- Before we try to fix relationships, we need to lay it before God first.
- Before we try to have a service filled with praise, we need to identify Him as Lord first.

Let's take care of the first things first!

Prayer

Invitation Song

Please stand and continue our time of worship.

Sermon Notes

Know Who You Are (Joshua 5:2-9)

The Sign of the Covenant

(2 Timothy 3:16; Genesis 17:3-8, 10, 14; Acts 2:37-39)

Know Who You Follow (Joshua 5:10-15)

The Passover (5:10-12)

The Commander of the Lord's Army (5:13-15)

(Hebrews 13:8)

Sermon Discussion Questions

- Think about your favorite hobby. What preparations do you make in advance before you can do what you love?
- Read Genesis 17. What was God's role in the covenant? What was required of Abraham (and his offspring)? Was anyone exempt from this requirement?
- Read Joshua 5:1-9. Who among the people had followed God's requirement? What did that mean for their identity?
- Had God treated them according to their status? How had He shown grace, blessing, sustenance, and patience with them...even while they had yet to follow Him?
- When faced with a direct command from God, how did the people respond? Would you have been quick to obey? Why or why not?
- Have you taken steps to be part of God's people today? By the grace of Christ, have you admitted your sin, believed Jesus is God's solution to sin, confessed your need for Him to be Lord and Savior, and demonstrated it through baptism? If so, share your story. If not, what is holding you back?
- Why is it essential to follow God in these first steps before trying to follow Him elsewhere?