

Lesson 5

Getting Right with God

Joshua 4.19-5.12

Introduction

Now, safely on the other side of the river, by the miraculous working of God, the Israelites camped at Gilgal. The CSB describes them coming up from the Jordan, which means they traveled up out of the river valley onto higher, more open and level land. The exact location of Gilgal¹⁶ is unknown, although some today try to tie it to a location around 4 miles northeast of Jericho.¹⁷ The name means ‘circle’ and is a good description for a fortified camp such as must have been present in Joshua’s time.¹⁸

The importance of this occasion is noted by the marking of the day the people arrived in Canaan, which would have been the 41st year after leaving Egypt. Their first encampment in the promised land began on the 10th day of the first month¹⁹ (late March/early April). This was the same time of year Israel left Egypt, crossing through the Red Sea, and it was the time of the Passover, Exodus 12.2, 18. Three days have passed since the opening of the book of Joshua (1.1-3.4) and now there will be three more days of preparation, before the celebration of the Passover (5.10-12).

The Chronology of Joshua 1-3

Understanding the timeline of the first five chapters of Joshua is difficult. Some have suggested that it covers only three days, while others stretch things out to eight. Those interpretations lie on the extreme of either end. I think David Howard’s summary²⁰ is one of the best, which I have summarized below.

Day 1 (Sunday, 4 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- 1.10-11 – Instructions given by Joshua to the officers that they should prepare to march within 3 days.
- 1.12-15 – Joshua calls up the warriors from the eastern tribes.
- 1.16-18 – All of Israel affirms Joshua as leader.
- 2.1 – Joshua dispatches the spies into Jericho, who arrive at Rahab’s house, hide, and escape that night into the hills West of Jericho.

Day 2 (Monday, 5 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- 2.22 – The spies continue hiding.
- The people are busy preparing to cross the Jordan.

Day 3 (Tuesday, 6 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- 2.22-23 – The spies continue hiding and returned sometime on this day to report to Joshua.
- The people’s preparations are most likely nearing completion.

Day 4 (Wednesday, 7 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- 3.1 – Joshua & the people depart Acacia Grove (Shittim), and arrive late in the day at the Jordan, where they spend the night. *This is the first of the 3 days mentioned in 3.2.*

Day 5 (Thursday, 8 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- The people remain next to the Jordan (3.2).

Day 6 (Friday, 9 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- 3.2-4 – The officers proceed through the camp giving instructions regarding the actual crossing, which will take place the next day.
- 3.5 – Joshua instructs the people to consecrate themselves in preparation for the wonder God would work the next day.

Day 7 (Saturday, 10 Nisan, 1407 BC)

- The crossing began and was accomplished, 3.15-17; 4.17. This was the 10th day of the first month, 4.19. This was the exact day prescribed in the law for the selection of the Passover lamb, Exodus 12.3. This was celebrated and commemorated in the building of the stone memorial.

The Significance of Seven Days:

The significance of the number seven, symbolizing completeness and perfection, is seen throughout the religious and priestly texts of the Old Testament, and it features prominently in the early chapters of Joshua. This emphasis on the number is fitting, given the book's focus on proper observance of rituals, and maintaining ritual purity. After the events leading up to the crossing of the Jordan, Israel built an altar with memorial stones on the seventh day, marking the completion of the first week.

This was followed by the Passover celebration, 5.10-12. Then, another sequence of seven days was dedicated to the ceremonial procession around Jericho (chapter 6). The way Jericho was taken was less of a military campaign and more of a religious observance, with Jericho being devoted to God, 6.17, 21 as a sacrifice.

The Emphasis on Holiness

The emphasis on adherence to Levitical commands in the opening chapters of Joshua is unmistakable. Here we observe Joshua and the Israelites' dedication to properly honoring their traditions and ceremonial instructions in preparation for claiming the Promised Land. By the time we arrive at chapter 5, three pivotal ceremonies are documented:

1. The circumcision of the Israelites.
2. The observance of the Passover.
3. Joshua's sacred encounter with the commander of the Lord's army.

The overarching message of chapters 1-5 is the necessity of aligning oneself with God as a precursor to receiving His blessings, echoing Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:²¹

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you, Matthew 6.33.

Interestingly, both seven-day intervals culminate with a miraculous act of God: the halting of the Jordan's flow and the fall of Jericho are both events that defy natural explanation, highlighting God's powerful action and involvement. Both serve as a testament to God's active presence and support for His people as they followed the ordained rituals and orders. As the Israelites proceeded with reverence and in the correct ritualistic order, God's mighty works were manifest, affirming the bond between divine favor and human faithfulness.

4.20-5.1: Memorial Stones Erected

Joshua commanded that they set up the twelve large stones they had taken out of the midst of the Jordan River be set up in Gilgal as a memorial. The importance of this memorial must not go unnoticed. Like what had been said in 4.6-7, parents were instructed to tell their children about the purpose of these things. Here, they are specifically told to tell their children that *Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground*, 4.22. God's holding back of the waters was the reason they could get to those stones and bring them to this place outside of the river's reach. The people had walked across a dry riverbed.

Verse 23 specifically ties the crossing of the Jordan to the Red Sea crossing. The crossing of the Jordan River led by Joshua is depicted as an event like the crossing of the Red Sea, which was led by Moses. Both events serve as powerful demonstrations of God's might, inspiring awe, and reverence in the land of Canaan. These events were for a purpose:

...so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord's hand is strong, and so that you may always fear the Lord your God, 4.24.

This connection between the two events is not only a historical link but also serves a rhetorical purpose, bridging the gap between those who directly experienced these events (the fathers) and those who learn of them later (the children).

Rahab previously mentioned the impact of the Red Sea miracle on the inhabitants of Canaan who had learned of it. The narrative now shifts to highlight the impact of the Jordan River crossing. Not only were the regular people fraught with fear, but also the kings of Canaan were struck with terror upon hearing that Israel had crossed the Jordan on dry land. 'Amorites' and 'Canaanites' are terms used to describe the same peoples. Their locations refer to peoples living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. The descriptions, emphasize all the rulers in Canaan. These rulers understood that they would soon have to confront the forces of the Living God, the deity of both heaven and earth, as described in verse 5.1. Rahab used similar language in 2.10-11 to describe Canaan's fear and terror of the approaching Israelites.

5.2-9: The Rite of Circumcision Restored

Joshua initiated the re-establishment of the rite of circumcision, a fundamental aspect of the covenant detailed in Genesis 17.11. This practice had been paused during the years of wandering in the desert, a time of punishment, though the specific reasons behind the pause remain a guess. Remember that over

the previous 40 years, all the adults who had departed Egypt had passed away. Some suggest that during this time, it might have been deemed inappropriate or unfeasible to carry out circumcision. If that is true, then the suspension of circumcision was not just due to the challenges of nomadic life, but also a reflection of the strained relationship between the Israelites and God.

Joshua received instructions to create flint knives to perform the operation. This took place at *Gibeath-haaraloth*, which translates to 'the hill of the foreskins' or better known in our modern way of speaking as 'Circumcision Hill.' Following the procedure, the men were required to stay in camp until they had fully recovered. The days of recovering were filled with vulnerability, as the nation had just crossed over into enemy territory, and all its fighting men were out of service. Their willingness to be in a weakened state within the land of their foes speaks volumes about their trust in God's protection and provision.

This is a recurring biblical theme where God allows His people to be brought to a point of weakness so His power might be more evidently displayed. Their obedience in the act of circumcision served as an expression of their deep faith (trust) in God. It served as a public testimony in their confidence in the Lord's safeguarding presence during a time when they were most exposed.

This act symbolized their personal reinstatement into the covenant and prepared them to enter the Promised Land, fulfilling the promises made to their ancestors despite the previous generation's failure to fully realize them. Joshua says they symbolically shed "the reproach of Egypt". Through the news of traders and nomads, Israel's prolonged and circular journey in the wilderness was likely a source of humor in Egypt. Twice Moses prays to the Lord:

"The Egyptians will hear about it, for by your strength you brought up this people from them. They will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, LORD, are among these people, how you, LORD, are seen face to face, how your cloud stands over them, and how you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. If you kill this people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will declare, 'Since the LORD wasn't able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them, he has slaughtered them in the wilderness,' Numbers 14.13-16.

Otherwise, those in the land you brought us from will say, 'Because the LORD wasn't able to bring them into the land he had promised them, and because he hated them, he brought them out to kill them in the wilderness,' Deuteronomy 9.28.

Now, with arrival in Canaan, news would have quickly spread about the God who had liberated them from Egyptian bondage had now fulfilled His promise by leading them into Canaan. Therefore, they named their first campsite Gilgal,²² meaning "rolling", to mark the divine act of removing their disgrace, as described in verse 5.9. This served as a powerful symbol of their renewed status and the fulfillment of God's promises.

5.10-12: The Passover Reinstated

The inaugural Passover was solemnly observed in Egypt on the night of the devastating plague that struck down the firstborn in the land, Exodus 12. The second Passover took place while the Israelites were encamped at Mount Sinai, Numbers 9.1-5. According to biblical records, the third significant celebration of this pivotal festival occurred at Gilgal. From this point on, the Passover would be

celebrated not only as a remembrance of the Exodus, the "going out" from Egypt, but also as a commemoration of the "entering in" into the Promised Land.

Like the rite of circumcision, the observance of Passover had been put on hold during the period of wandering in the wilderness. Notably, the Passover law, as stated in Exodus 12.48, explicitly forbade uncircumcised individuals from partaking in the ritual. As time passed and the Israelites continued their journey, an increasing proportion of the population, those born in the wilderness who had not been circumcised, became ineligible to participate in the feast. However, this hindrance was eliminated once the new generation was circumcised at Gilgal.

On the fourteenth day of Nisan, just a few days following the mass circumcision, as referenced in 4.19, the Israelites celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land. Despite the physical discomfort the men were probably still experiencing, the festival was likely marked with immense joy and gratitude (5.10).

A unique aspect of this Passover at Gilgal was the inclusion of the "produce of the land" in the feast for the first time. Alongside the traditional unleavened bread, the Israelites consumed "parched grain" from Canaan. This shift in diet symbolized a significant transition: with the availability of Canaan's harvest, God ceased the miraculous provision of manna that had sustained the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness, 5.11-12. This cessation of manna and the consumption of the land's produce underscored their new beginning in the Promised Land, a fulfillment of God's promise and a tangible sign of their changed circumstances.

What's In This for us Today?

1. **Obedience to God's Commands:** The act of circumcision for the Israelites was a sign of their covenant with God. Obedience to God's commands is still important today and how that obedience serves as a sign of our own commitment to God.
2. **The Continuity of God's Promises:** The lesson emphasizes the fulfillment of God's promises to the patriarchs by allowing their children to enter the Promised Land. We must always be aware of how our own relationships with God influence future generations.
3. **Learning from the Past:** The mention of the Israelites' disobedience and wandering teaches us about the importance of learning from past mistakes and understanding the consequences of disobedience to God.
4. **Transition to a New Life:** The change from manna to the produce of the land signifies a new chapter for the Israelites. This can be applied to the concept of new beginnings in life and trusting God for provision in new phases.
5. **Symbolism in Actions:** Gilgal meaning "rolling" and the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt can be an excellent point for discussing how Christians can experience the 'rolling away' of past shame and stepping into a new identity in Christ.

Conclusion

In Joshua 3-4.18, we see not only a historical account but can also reflect on God's faithfulness, His expectations for obedience, and the continuity of His promises. The reinstatement of circumcision and the observance of Passover underscore the importance of rituals and memorials in our spiritual life. These serve as a means of remembrance and worship.

This lesson also highlights the significance of learning from our past mistakes and understanding the consequences of disobedience to God. It underscores the delicate balance between God's grace and the conditions within His covenant. In the end, the Israelites' arrival at Gilgal encourages us to remember, to obey, to trust, to learn, and to come together as we walk in faith, guided by the same God who led His people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. May we, too, experience the rolling away of our past shame and embrace the new identity we have in Christ, as we journey onward in faith and obedience.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline

1. Introduction:

- Overview of the Israelites' arrival at Gilgal and its significance.
- Read and discuss key passages from Joshua 4-5.

2. Explore important themes from the text.

- 4.20-5.1 – Memorial Stones Erected
- 5.2-9 – Circumcision Restored
- 5.10-18 – Passover Reinstated

3. Discuss how these lessons apply to our lives today.

For Thought and Discussion

1. How can we create personal "memorials" in our lives to remember God's faithfulness and the times He has helped us in our Christian life?
2. In what ways can we relate the act of circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God to our own commitment to obeying His commands today?
3. What lessons can we learn from the continuity of God's promises to the patriarchs and how our actions today can influence future generations?
4. How do baptism and communion, play a role in our spiritual lives, and what significance do they hold for us as Christians?
5. What can we glean from the Israelites' disobedience and wandering compared to the importance of learning from our past mistakes and the consequences of disobedience to God?
6. How does the paradox of God's grace, even in the face of Israel's disobedience, deepen our understanding of His unmerited favor in our own lives?

7. How can we apply the instruction for parents to tell their children about God's acts to our own practice of sharing our faith and experiences with the younger generation?
8. What does the transition from manna to the produce of the land signify for us in terms of new beginnings and trusting God for provision in new phases of life?
9. What symbolism can we find in the name "Gilgal" (meaning "rolling") and the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt, and how can we apply this concept to our own experiences of leaving behind shame and embracing a new identity in Christ?

Group Activities

1. **Setting Up Your Own "Memorial":** In small groups, brainstorm significant moments in your spiritual journey. Discuss things you can do to remember God's faithfulness in that instance.
2. **Time of Sharing:** Take turns sharing personal stories when God's grace was evident in your life, even when you faced challenges or disobedience. Encourage one another by acknowledging God's continuous faithfulness.

Final Encouraging Word:

Just as the Israelites set up memorials to remember God's faithfulness, we too can create moments of remembrance in our lives. Obedience to God's commands remain a sign of our commitment to Him, and as we navigate life's challenges, we can draw strength from our fellow Christians.

The reinstatement of Passover and circumcision reminds us of the importance of rituals in our spiritual life and the significance of new beginnings. Learning from our past mistakes and understanding the balance between God's grace and covenant conditions guide us as we go along.

Embrace your new identity in Christ as you continue to grow and serve in His name.

¹⁶ There were several other Gilgal's in the Old Testament. There was a town in the days of Samuel and Saul by this name and served as a place of worship and sacrifice (1 Samuel 10.8; 11.15), but this may not be the same place. See Woudstra, p. 94.

¹⁷ Bratcher, Robert G., and Barclay Moon Newman. *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Joshua*. UBS Handbook Series. London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1983, p. 55.

¹⁸ Hess, p. 127.

¹⁹ In Joshua's day this month was known as *Abib*, the first month of the year according to the Levitical Law. It was a holy month according to Deuteronomy 16. This month began with the first new moon after the spring equinox, so we can safely say the Jordan River crossing took place sometime between March 21 and April 18. Wiseman writes: "the year began with the new moon nearest to the vernal equinox when the sun was in Aries (Jos., *Ant.* 3.201), and the Passover on the fourteenth day of Nisan coincided with the first full moon (Ex. 12:2-6)."

²⁰ Howard, David M. Jr. "Three Days' in Joshua 1-3: Resolving a Chronological Conundrum.' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 1998. P. 539-550.

²¹ Howard, David M., Jr. *Joshua*. Vol. 5 of *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998, p. 61.

²² Gilgal means "circle (of stones)," the root word of which means "to roll," or "roll away." There are at least three places, maybe as many as five distinct locations by this name. See Kotter, Wade R. "Gilgal (Place)." *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 1022. Gilgal was the first of three religious centers in Israel during the days of Joshua. Shiloh, 18.1, and Shechem, 24.1) are also referenced as important religious sites. An altar was established at Gilgal, 9.23, 27, and was still a place of sacrifice during the time of Samuel, 1 Samuel 10.8. Samuel judged there, 1 Samuel 7.16, and it was the location Saul was made king, 1 Samuel 11.14-15.