

Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 8

Joshua 5

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on Joshua through Ruth. This is session 8, Joshua 5, Preparing to Inherit the Land.

Now we're going to consider Joshua chapter five, and this concludes what I would call the preparations for inheriting the land, chapters one to five.

Chapter six begins the section on the actual battles, Jericho, and so on. So, the question is, one of the questions is, what is going on in chapter five? And what's the purpose for the events here? As I just mentioned, I would argue that chapter five is one and is a conclusion to the preceding section. Whether you accept that or not, not all scholars do, but if it's the introduction to the next section, it's the first encounter with Canaanites in the land, or at least by hearing.

But really, everything from chapter two to verse 15 has nothing to do with these kings of the Canaanites. So, I think chapter five, verses two to 15 are a unit, and there are three episodes here, three things told us here. And I would put them all under the rubric of ritual preparations.

The first one is, verses two to nine, the circumcision of the people, this is one of the rituals commanded in the Pentateuch. Verses 10 to 12 are the celebration of the Passover for the first time in a long time. And then the third section is Joshua out front of Jericho encountering the commander of the Lord's army in reference to the Holy Ground there.

I think in all three of these cases, it's the idea of getting themselves right with the Lord before they engage in the battles. As I mentioned in an earlier segment, it reminds me of Jesus' words, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then all these other things will be added to you. So, if Israel is doing things by the book and sanctified themselves, made themselves holy, as we see in chapter three, then everything will play out in their favor through the rest of the book.

And we see that happening, and we see a spectacular case of where that did not happen when they were not doing what they should do, chapters seven and eight. So now in chapter five, we have verses two to nine, and we have a segment discussing circumcision. And it's interesting that we have a reference here to circumcision a second time.

And the question is what in the world is that meaning? And scholars have discussed that, and debated that. I doubt it, I don't think it means that literally these males are

to be cut individually a second time. But it probably refers to maybe the first time that when circumcision was first instituted and the people were coming out of Egypt when they were doing that back then.

It does go on to explain this. Verse two mentions, make flint knives, circumcise the sons of Israel a second time. So, Joshua did that.

He calls this, the place that this happens in verse three is a place called Gibeon Haarot. And if you have a Bible that has footnotes, it will tell you that this is the Hebrew for a hill of foreskins. So, it probably was not called that before Joshua got there.

But as a result of the events that happened there, this is what the name was given. And verse four tells us why this happened. When they came out of Egypt, the people that died in the wilderness and the people that came out had been circumcised, yet everybody, verse five, who was born on the way had not been circumcised.

So, this is the reason for this second circumcision to be done. So, for 40 years, verse five, they did not engage in this practice. Verse seven tells us the same thing.

I want to pause here and just make a point about Moses, the great leader. Moses obviously was a man of God and a great leader, there was no prophet like Moses since. But Moses had an interesting encounter with God back in Exodus chapter four.

So, I want to have you turn with me to that and we'll just point something out. Keep your finger here in Joshua five. But in Exodus chapter four, just to set the stage, Exodus three and four where God meets Moses at the burning bush.

God tells Moses that he takes his feet off, takes his shoes off, ground you're standing on is holy ground. And then God tells Moses that he is to be the next leader for the nation and bring them out of Egypt and all that. Moses has a series of five objections and is a man of little faith.

And in each case, God provides an answer, and says, I'm going to be with you, I will give you this and that. And at the end when Moses, his fourth objection is that he's a man of slow speech and tongue. And God says I'll give you your brother Aaron to serve as your spokesperson.

And then finally, Moses just says, just please send somebody else. I run out of excuses but just send somebody else. And God was kind of angry at that point.

But finally, Moses agrees and God has kind of propped him up in a tottery way, I suppose. But God says to Moses in Exodus chapter four, verses 21 to 23, that I will be with you and everything's going to work out.

Then there's a strange little episode in chapter four, verses 24 to 26. And just look at it, and I'll make a couple of comments. So, it says, at a lodging place on the way, the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. Sought to kill him.

I always chuckle at that, thinking God tried to kill him, sought to kill him, what happened? Did he miss? But anyway, God's intent is to do that. So then verse 25, Zipporah, who's Moses' wife, thinking quickly, grabs a flint and cuts off his foreskin. And ESV says her son's foreskin, but it just literally says his foreskin.

And, oh, I'm sorry, took off her son's foreskin and touched his feet. Some versions add Moses' feet. So, in other words, Zipporah, in response to this, whatever form the attack from God was, she takes a flint knife and circumcises their son.

And in the process says, you are a bridegroom of blood to me. So, he, God, let him, Moses, alone. It was then that she said, a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.

Now this ceremony or this kind of thing is not really known anywhere else in the Bible. We don't really know much about this. So, we could guess all day long as to what bridegroom of blood means.

But stepping back, what we can see is that there's three things that happen. God tries to kill Moses, his wife circumcises their son, and God relents. So this illustrates to us that Moses, who is now the great, to be a great leader, had not even in his own life practiced this ritual of circumcision.

And of course, at this point, the law had not been given. There was the only provision was obedience and circumcision that God had sent back to Abraham. And Moses was not even faithful to doing this one thing with his own son.

So, I think the point here is that God is saying to Moses and to Israel and to the readers, that even the leader is not exempt from the requirements of keeping God's word and obeying God's word. But it's a great irony because, well, first of all, I'll just point out the flint knives in Joshua and the flint here. Those are the only two places where the flint is mentioned.

So, there's an interesting connection there, I think. And I think it helps to remind us of this episode here. But then it takes us back to Joshua 2, or Joshua 5. And what we realize then is that Moses, who survived barely, it seems like, this near-death experience.

And you'd think it would be a formative experience in his own life, did not take care than the next 40 years to make sure Israel was circumcised through those years in

the wilderness. He neglected that. So now when they're in Canaan, it's up to them that they have to do this second circumcision of the group that had not been circumcised through the last 40 years.

So, in verse 8 now in Joshua 5, so they finish the circumcision, they remain there till they are healed. And the Lord said to Joshua, today I've rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. And so the name of this place is called Gilgal to this day.

Apparently, the name seemed to have two names, Gibeah Haralot, Hill of Foreskins. Gilgal is related to the word to roll away. The word to roll away in Hebrew is Galal, and Gilgal is related to that.

So, there's that kind of a connection as well. One question that arises here is, what is the reproach of Egypt? And some commentators think that it's the guilt of Israel's sin is now being lifted, and the reproach from Egypt is now being lifted. But I think it's more, it's something else, namely the reproach that Egypt directed against Israel.

In other words, Israel is now completely free of its bondage to Egypt. Even psychologically, they are not anymore. There's a reference in Zephaniah chapter 2, verse 8, that talks about the reproach of Moab, Moab reproaching other nations.

And so, I think that's the idea here, that Egypt, whatever hold it had on Israel's psyche, even those 40 years later, is now, they're now being, it's now being wiped out. So that's the first ritual preparation for entering the land in this chapter. The second is in verses 10 to 12.

And here we have now the first Passover in the land of Canaan. And it's said when they're in Camp Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the 14th day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho. And back in Exodus chapter 12, when the instructions of the Passover are given, this is the day that they're to do it.

So, they're beginning, they're doing things by the book again. And notice, verse 11, that after the day of the Passover, the very next day, they for the first time ate of the produce of the land. So, remember back in Numbers, they'd been sent spies into the land.

They talk about the land flowing with milk and honey, the promises that God had given about all that. But they hadn't, they'd been in the land a while, a few days, at least a week or more, but they hadn't apparently eaten yet of the land. And now for the first time, they eat of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain.

And then significantly, in verse 12, the manna, which was the stuff that they were fed for 40 years in the wilderness, that white stuff that they got sick of, that for the first

time ceased. So, there's a significant symbolic transition from the Israelites who were dependent on God, the Israelites of the desert, now the Israelites of the land of Canaan itself. And there was no longer any manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.

Here, I want to take us back to the book of Deuteronomy and show us something about the Israelites and the Canaanites. Turn to Deuteronomy chapter six, and many of you know this chapter, especially for the prayer that's in verses four to nine. It's sometimes called the Shema, because that's the Hebrew word here, the command, H-E-A-R.

Here, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord, et cetera, in verses four to nine. But I want to focus on verses 10 and 11 here, because looking ahead, Moses is saying, Deuteronomy chapter six, verse 10, when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to you with great and good cities that you did not build, houses full of good things you did not fill, cisterns you did not dig, vineyards, olive trees you did not plant. And then it goes on.

So, Israel is coming into a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of plenty, all of these things. And now here in Joshua chapter five, we see for the first time they're partaking of that. And they're going to go into a land in which they don't have to labor to take the things.

I'm of an age where I remember some of the heights of the Cold War. Back in the early 1980s, there was an issue of short-range nuclear weapons in Europe, the Soviet Union, NATO, and the Allies. And one of the serious discussions was the development of a nuclear bomb called the neutron bomb.

And the neutron bomb was different from the bomb that fell on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in Japan. The neutron bomb was a bomb that did not destroy buildings. It shot out neutrons, and radiation, and it killed people, but it did not destroy cities.

And that was the perfect, "perfect bomb" for warfare in a crowded place like Europe, according to the military strategists at the time. I'm reminded of that here in a kind of maybe imperfect way because Israel was coming into a land in which they were not going to flatten the buildings. We'll see later in the book when it talks about the destroying of the capturing of the cities.

It does not mention, there are only three cities in Joshua that are actually burned with fire. Jericho, Ai, and Hazor, Hazor. The rest of them, it doesn't mention that.

And I think the reason is because of what's stated here in Deuteronomy, that they're going to move into land in which the systems are intact, the houses are intact.

Israel's moving in. And so, in a sense, they're destroying and displacing the people, but the buildings are still remaining in their place.

And that's something as well. Let me, while I'm thinking of it here, I'm going to refer back to something I mentioned earlier in the section talking about the date of the Exodus and this level of great destruction that I mentioned that happened around 1200 BC, maybe a little bit later. It was attributed originally to Joshua.

That level of destruction also goes throughout almost all of the Mediterranean. So, it could not have been, it was up in Asia Minor and Turkey and through the Greek islands and in Egypt. And so that was not just evidence of Joshua's destruction, first point.

Second point, if we take the Deuteronomy passage seriously, we should not really expect to see traces of Israel's destruction of Canaan because, in most places, it did not destroy the cities. It just drove out the people. So, all these other burned layers of destruction are not necessarily really due to the Israelites.

And that, in my view, then would be why we have an earlier time when Israel entered, namely around 1400. The chaos that you see in about 1200 would be part of what I would see as the period of the Judges. And the period of the Judges is its own time of chaos.

And that fits very well with this other archaeological evidence. So that's just a footnote to the discussion earlier of the date of Joshua and the date of the Exodus. Back to Joshua 5. So, this second ritual preparation is there to now celebrate the Passover for the first time in years, it appears, in fulfillment of the commands, and instructions that they have to do this every year.

So, they're sort of getting things, everything nailed down before they're going to get into the land. Now, finally, in chapter 5, we have verses 13 to 15 that are a new thing. And it's not a third, on the face of it, it's not a third ritual of some type, like the first two.

But it's Joshua standing out by Jericho, looking. He sees a man standing in front of him. He has a sword in his hand.

Joshua wonders who this is. But his real primary interest is focused on the question that he asks at the end of verse 13, which says, are you for us or for our adversaries? So, you can tell that this man is some sort of military figure. He has a sword in his hand, but he's not so much interested in who it is.

He wants to know, are you with us or not? And in other words, Joshua's interest, in my view, is more myopic. I want to see what good you're going to be for me. And the man's response then is just basically verse 14, no.

I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come. Now, in those words, the commander of the army of the Lord should immediately have told Joshua that he was for him, that this commander was for Joshua and the people.

But the man does not identify himself beyond that. And he doesn't tell him, I'm going to be on your side or the other side. He just says, no, that's not the important thing.

What's the important thing to know is my identity, not my function. Not what I'm going to do for you, but who I am. And I'm the commander of the Lord's army, and everything else is going to flow from that.

You should have confidence then if you know that the Lord is in charge of the world and the universe, the Lord has promised to be with you, and I'm his commander, then things are going to go well for you if you follow me. So, verse, to his credit, well, to his credit then, Joshua then falls down and worships him on his face and says, so what does my Lord say to his servant? And I hope you have a Bible where it says, my Lord, if you look carefully, the word Lord is not capitalized. It's lowercase l, and that's a different word in Hebrew than the word, the Lord referring to God.

This is the word Adon, which just means, this is a form of address to a superior, a form of polite address. What does my Lord say? It's a term used with reference to humans, usually between one human and another. Adon can also mean an owner, a master of a field or a slave.

So, he's just saying, in other words, Joshua's not really convinced this is a divine figure. He's just thinking this is another human. But he does say, what does he say to his servant? And so, the commander of the Lord's army responds verse 15, take off your sandals because the place you're standing is holy.

And that should be immediately obvious that it takes us back to the story of Moses with God in the burning bush in Exodus chapter three. So, there are quite a few references in these first five chapters to the Exodus and Moses and to what God did in the Red Sea and with Moses and Egypt and all that. Now, many commentators in their outlining of the book would say that chapter three, chapter five, verses 13 and 15 are the first, the opening segment of the next portion of the book, namely the battle of Jericho and then the following battles.

And so, there'll be a major break between verses 12 and 13. It mentions Jericho, verse 15, so that makes sense. But my view is that no, this episode here belongs with the other ritual preparations.

So, we have circumcision, we have Passover, and we have a re-emphasis on holiness and being holy. Remember, God said in chapter three, sanctify yourselves. So, I think these three are bound together.

There are two episodes that seem similar. There are ritual things and then a separate one, but they're all tied together by this focus on preparing yourself before the Lord, seeking first the kingdom of God, and then everything else will be added unto you. So that's how I see the ending of the preparations.

God has been with them. God has given the charge, chapter one, and we have the assurance from Rahab that they're going to have success. In the meantime, we have a beautiful picture of a Gentile coming to faith in Israel's God.

We have the miracle of the crossing, the memorializing of that, and then the ritual preparations before they actually get into the first conflicts. So that will stop at the end of this first section.

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