

*The Priority of God's Promise*

Joshua 5:1-15

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Have you ever heard the saying, *"Strike while the iron is hot?"* It is taken from the work of a blacksmith who heats the metal, and then while the iron is red hot, he beats it into the desired shape. The phrase means to make the most of your opportunities.

There is some truth to this saying. Missed opportunities can be costly, for example, in May and early June of 1940 at Dunkirk, France. You have probably heard the story, or perhaps you have seen the movie *Miracle at Dunkirk*. At the beginning of WWII, the Germans had used Blitzkrieg or Lightning War to push through Belgium and France in about six weeks. The German Army had the French, and British Allied forces backed up to the English Channel at Dunkirk. All the Germans had to do was press their advantage, but they did not. Instead, Hitler called for the German Army to stop in order to rest and refuel because they were close to out-stretching their supply lines.

So, while the German army rested, Winston Churchill mobilized the English Navy and any local citizen who had a boat, ship, or any type of sailing vessel to cross the English Channel to rescue 350,000 troops who stood on the beach. It was a daring and dangerous rescue. The Luftwaffe or German Airforce sunk many ships and killed many men. However, it worked. The French and British Armies were rescued, and so they were able to fight another day.

While the Allied Forces celebrated the rescue of their forces, Churchill reminded the nation that wars are not won by retreats. However, this was one retreat that saved England and Europe because it allowed them to fight another day.

Hitler made a grave tactical error. He did not strike while the iron was hot. He allowed the Allied Forces to escape. This error cost Germany the war. If Hitler had pressed his advantage, then he would have been able to annihilate the Allied Forces, and there would have hardly been any men left to fight for England and France. Germany could have crossed the English Channel and walked right into England with hardly any military opposition.

I told you this story because we find a similar dilemma in Joshua 5. Listen to v. 1 again:

*As soon as all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel.*

Verse 1 tells us that the enemy had their backs against the wall. They had no fight left in them. Any military leader worth his salt would have pressed his advantage at that moment because the enemies of Israel were melting away.

However, he did not strike. Instead of moving directly into the heat of battle, Yahweh commanded the people of Israel to press pause on the battle in order to get their priorities straight.

Instead of going to war, they were going to worship. They needed to remember the deliverance of God. They needed to remember the covenant of promise that God had made with them through Abraham.

They needed to worship their Warrior King because neither Joshua nor Israel would fight the Battle of Jericho—Yahweh would fight the battle.

Here is the main point: *Remembering, renewal, and worship of Jesus with God's people is always our greatest priority.*

However, our corrupt flesh, our deceptive hearts, the corrupt world, and crafty enemy tells us otherwise. *The world, the flesh, and the devil are like the serpent in the Garden; they dress their temptations to neglect worship in the rags of moral, political, and scientific wisdom.* They tell us to neglect to gather for worship because it is too risky, too hard, and too unsafe. However, in the middle of this pandemic, what we need the most need is to gather in worship and remember our Great God and King.

### **I. We Must Remember and Practice the Sign of the New Covenant (vv. 2-9)**

*At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time." <sup>3</sup> So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. <sup>4</sup> And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. <sup>5</sup> Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. <sup>6</sup> For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>7</sup> So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. <sup>8</sup> When the circumcising of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. <sup>9</sup> And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.*

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Israel. It was the ritual of cutting the foreskin off of the male body member. That is all I am going to explain about the procedure of circumcision.

What I want to do right now is press pause and explain the meaning of circumcision and answer the question: *How does the sign of circumcision in the Old Covenant apply to us?*

In order to make application to this Old Testament ritual, we need to understand its meaning and how it carries forward into the New Covenant.

So, let's do a little biblical theology in the sermon. Let's trace the purpose of circumcision in ancient Israel all the way to the New Testament.

To begin, we must go all the way back to Genesis. Circumcision was instituted as the sign of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:3-8, 10-11:

*And God said to [Abram], <sup>4</sup> "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish my covenant between me*

*and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God . . . <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.*

Since that time, all of the males who were part of God's people were circumcised. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant.

However, as the sign of circumcision unfolded in the Old Testament *there was another aspect of circumcision that was revealed that changes the significance of circumcision.* In Deuteronomy 10:16, Yahweh commanded Israel to:

*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*

In Joshua 3:5, we heard similar language to circumcision when Joshua commanded the people:

*Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.*

Here Yahweh began to teach the men and women of Israel that to be in relationship with Him was more than the external sign of circumcision. It was a matter of consecrating their stubborn hearts. The problem was, as hard as they tried, they could not circumcise nor even consecrate their rebellious hearts.

Then in Deuteronomy 30:6, we learn more about circumcision when Yahweh says:

*And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*

Now we learn that Yahweh will circumcise their hearts. However, this was not going to occur until sometime in the future.

Then in Jeremiah 9:25-26, we learn a little more about circumcision and the sign of the covenant. Jeremiah tells us:

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh . . . and uncircumcised in heart.*

In other words, eventually, the external sign of circumcision would no longer be enough. Eventually, a person must be circumcised in their heart in order to be in right relationship with God. This really makes a person helpless because no one can circumcise the heart.

Then, later in Jeremiah, Yahweh says He will accomplish in them what He has commanded. He will circumcise the hearts of His people. In Jeremiah 32:38-40, we learn a little more:

*And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. <sup>39</sup> I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. <sup>40</sup> I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.*

Now we hear the promise to Abraham made with the coming promise that Yahweh will put new hearts in His people. In other words, the covenant is going to change. Yahweh is going to change the hearts of His people with the New Covenant.

Then, Yahweh explained more in Ezekiel 36:26 when He said:

*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

Here again, is the prophecy of the promise of the circumcision of the heart. He does not say circumcision, but He is describing the transformation of the heart that circumcision and consecration of the heart describes.

What we learn is that the promise of circumcision of the heart will be inaugurated with the inauguration of the New Covenant.

This raises two questions for us: When did the old sign of the covenant change? What is the sign of the New Covenant?

First, Hebrews 9:15 tells us that the New Covenant was established by Christ's death and resurrection:

*Therefore he [Jesus] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.*

What Hebrews teaches us is that the Old Covenant ended when Jesus came, lived a perfect life for sinners, died as our substitute on the cross, and rose from the dead. His life, death, and resurrection inaugurated the New Covenant.

Second, what is the sign of being in the New Covenant? Water baptism or baptism by immersion is the sign of the New Covenant. Believer's Baptism was instituted by Jesus immediately after His death and resurrection and just before Jesus ascension into heaven in Matthew 28:19 is the sign of the New Covenant. Jesus said:

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Here is the thing about baptism. The word baptism means immersion. After you make disciples, you are to baptize them upon their profession of faith in Christ. This is what we call Believer's Baptism.

Baptism was not a standing rite in the Old Covenant that somehow made it into the New Covenant. It was established by Jesus in the Great Commission.<sup>1</sup>

The third aspect of water baptism by immersion is that when you consider all the spiritual realities of the New Covenant, only baptism by immersion symbolizes the substitutionary death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the person stands in the water, he is standing in his grave. When a person goes under the water, he identifies with Jesus' burial and proclaims he has died to his old life. When the person comes up out of the water, it is a picture of the dead heart coming to life. It is a declaration that the heart has been circumcised. Another way of saying it is that the person has been born again.

There are a couple of key differences between the old rite of circumcision and Believer's Baptism that are very important.

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<sup>1</sup> Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership*, 61.

First, in the Abrahamic Covenant, failure to circumcise the male child resulted in judgment. So, whereas failure to circumcise threatens judgment, Believer's Baptism, on the other hand, pictures judgment fully and finally fulfilled. Believer's Baptism is the picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Also, to disobey the old rite of circumcision was to be cut off from the covenant people of God. However, Believer's Baptism is the beautiful picture that Jesus has already been cut off from the land of the living for covenant breakers like us so that we may have eternal life in Him. Believer's Baptism is the picture of judgment satisfied in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

The last difference between Believer's Baptism and circumcision is that circumcision demanded that God's people renew their own hearts.

On the other hand, baptism is the declaration of what God has already done in the New Covenant. Through our faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, God has circumcised the hearts of His people. Colossians 2:11-12 says:

*In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

So, while Believer's Baptism does not save you, it is the sign of the New Covenant. Believer's Baptism is the sign that your heart has been circumcised by God Himself. Believer's Baptism marks you out as God's New Covenant people. Believer's Baptism proclaims the gospel and that Jesus has poured out His Spirit in you, cleansed you, and renewed you. Believer's Baptism proclaims that you have been born again.<sup>3</sup>

Believer's Baptism is the ultimate fulfillment of Joshua 5:9

*And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.*

Here is what I mean, in the New Covenant, Jesus took the shame, reproach, guilt, and punishment for our sin. It was rolled off us and on to Him. He is our Ultimate Gilgal. He paid the penalty for our guilt of sin and buried our shame in the tomb. His resurrection from the dead on the third day is our hope of eternal life.

The question is: If you have trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior have you followed Him in believer's baptism? Believer's Baptism is the sign of the New Covenant. Have you taken the sign of the New Covenant?

Believer's Baptism is the *first ordinance* and sign of the New Covenant that we practice as a New Testament church. Believer's Baptism is the putting on of the wedding ring, and then comes the consummation of the marriage.

On the other hand, the Lord's Supper is the on-going renewal of our covenant with Christ and His church, and this leads us to our second point in vv. 10-12.

## **II. We Must Remember the Priority of Celebrating The New Covenant Meal (vv. 10-12)**

Look in vv. 10-12:

*While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho.<sup>11</sup> And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land,*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 73.

*unleavened cakes and parched grain. <sup>12</sup> And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of the land. And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.*

The sign of the covenant of circumcision was not practiced during the forty years in the wilderness; likewise, the Passover meal was not celebrated.

So, after the sign of the covenant was reinstituted, the Passover meal was renewed. The Passover commemorated the Death Angel passing over the houses in Egypt. On that night, the Death Passed through the nation of Egypt and killed the first-born male of every household unless he found the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorposts. All of Israel ate this meal with sandals on and ready to leave because after God unleashed that final plague, Pharaoh set God's people free.

Since that time, the Passover Meal was celebrated every year. However, when Israel broke covenant with God in the wilderness, it was not celebrated until the old generation had died. After that, the new generation was ready to go into the Promised Land.

In vv. 10-12, we see that Israel is now in the Promised Land. So, before they go to war, they needed to remember, renew and celebrate. They needed to worship God for His great salvation. So, the sign of the covenant was reinstituted, and the Passover Meal was renewed. There was no need for manna anymore because the long-awaited blessings had arrived.

However, just like we do not use the old sign of the covenant of circumcision, neither do we celebrate the Passover. So, the question is: How does the Passover apply to us in the New Covenant?

The transition from the sign of the covenant from circumcision to baptism is more challenging to trace through Scripture, but the transformation of the Passover meal is easier to understand.

In Luke 22:14-22, Jesus had gathered to eat the Passover Meal with His disciples. During this meal, He clearly explains how the Passover Meal now becomes the New Covenant Meal or, as it is also known, The Lord's Supper:

*And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." <sup>17</sup> And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. <sup>18</sup> For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." <sup>19</sup> And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>20</sup> And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."*

In vv. 2-12, in the sign of the covenant of circumcision and the Passover, *we find shadows of our New Covenant ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper that we practice today in the church.*

As Pastor Eric said last Sunday, we must remember that the Lord saves all of His people. These two ordinances remind us that the Lord saves all of His people. These ordinances help us to remember the perfect life that Jesus lived and the suffering He endured. These ordinances help us remember that Jesus paid the penalty for our sin through His sacrifice for sin. These ordinances remind us that by Jesus' death, the guilt of

our sin and shame of our sin was rolled off of us and onto Him. His death was our death. His burial was our burial, and His resurrection is our resurrection.

When we come together and take the Lord's Supper, we share in the benefits of Christ's death on our behalf. We have fellowship with one another and with Christ.

Think about it this way, Believer's Baptism is an ordinance where the individual publicly proclaims that he or she belongs to Christ. However, when we take the Lord's Supper, it is the corporate proclamation of our union with Christ and His church.

In the Lord's Supper, we corporately share in the body and blood of the New Covenant established by the death of the Lord Jesus. In the Lord's Supper, the gospel becomes not just something we hear and see but something we eat.

Now I want to press us deeper and challenge us on the issue of worship that is at the heart of the ordinances of Believer's Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

These ordinances are not just "*We can take it or leave it*" ordinances. They are not ordinances where you think: Well, the Lutherans do it this way, Presbyterians do it this way, and Baptists do it this way, but these ordinances are really not all that important.

On the contrary, these ordinances are at the heart of our worship. They are means of sanctifying grace whereby we remember the person and work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Listen to me, at one point during the Protestant Reformation, being baptized by immersion was like signing your death notice. If you think coming to church with the possibility of catching COVID and dying is dangerous, then you would not have made it during the Reformation.

Because those who held to and practiced Believer's Baptism were persecuted, and many were killed because they believed God's word taught Believer's Baptism.

Brothers and sisters, our ordinances are precious means of sanctifying grace and God-glorifying worship that were hammered out on the anvil of suffering.

Listen to me, as the pandemic continues to unfold, you and I are going to have to decide if gathering for worship is truly a priority. Fear is already at an all-time high, and reports of the new strains of the virus only create more fear. Now the CDC says we should wear two masks and continue avoiding crowds. Brothers and sisters, those who stay away from worship because of fear of the virus or for fear of spreading the virus, the elders and I respect that, but at some point, you will need to ask yourself how long you can stay away from the gathering of God's people in a local church?

There are other things that are more important than *safety in a worship service*. A person can only take so much fear, and the media and government will continue to feed it to you. Friends, the suicide rates are through the roof because of people living in isolation, and therapists report that depression is skyrocketing.

Brothers and sisters we have a Savior who called us to take up our cross and follow Him. Safety should never be too high on a Christian's list of concerns when it comes to worship and the gospel. It may be that eventually we are at risk of being arrested if we gather. What will you do then?

Think about it this way, if we were concerned with safety, would we ever do missions. If we were concerned with safety, then would we have laid hands on a family and sent them to the Middle East to live in the middle of a war zone to share the gospel when missiles are landing near their house? Not only that, they live in a place where Islamic radicals would kill them if they got the chance. I simply want us to be consistent when we think about the issue of safety in worship. It is possible that one day a faithful worship gathering like this will not be safe for any of us.

I am not trying to make people feel guilty for not attending right now. However, we need to put things in perspective so that we get our priorities in order so that when reports of the danger of the virus change or some other issue comes along and declares that we should not gather, you will be ready and have your priority of worship in order.

Because the government eventually might tell us it is not wise to gather for worship but is that really wise for the people of God? Is that really what our priorities are?

We can learn some things from church history when it comes to danger and the church. In Fall 1854, Charles Spurgeon was the pastor of New Park Street Chapel in London when the cholera epidemic broke out. Under Spurgeon's leadership, New Park Street did five things: (1) They prioritized local ministry and visited the sick and dying. (2) They adjusted their meetings where they could continue meeting. (3) They visited the sick and grieving. (4) They remained open to new evangelistic opportunities. Finally, (5), they entrusted their lives to God. Then speaking in 1866, amid another cholera outbreak, Spurgeon gave this charge to pastors and all Christians:

*And now, again, is the minister's time; and now is the time for all of you who love souls. You may see men more alarmed than they are already; and if they should be, mind that you avail yourselves of the opportunity of doing them good. You have the Balm of Gilead; when their wounds smart, pour it in. You know of Him who died to save; tell them of Him. Lift high the cross before their eyes. Tell them that God became man that man might be lifted to God. Tell them of Calvary, and its groans, and cries, and sweat of blood. Tell them of Jesus hanging on the cross to save sinners. Tell them that — "There is life for a look at the Crucified One." Tell them that He is able to save to the uttermost all them that come unto God by Him. Tell them that He is able to save even at the eleventh hour, and to say to the dying thief, "today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise."<sup>4</sup>*

Brothers and sisters, Joshua and Israel, opened themselves up for attack when they stopped to worship and remember the covenant. The men were healing from their circumcision and could not fight.

While the nation was remembering the Passover, their enemies could have rushed in, attacked them, and killed them. But the nation was not putting their trust in the art and science of war—they were trusting in Yahweh. Are you trusting your Divine Warrior King?

Brothers and sisters, there comes a time when we must get our priorities for worship in order. I know I have challenged many of you and probably just offended many of you. Please feel free to email me at [eric@gabcames.org](mailto:eric@gabcames.org).

### **III. We Must Worship Our Warrior King (Joshua 5:13-15)**

*When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?"<sup>14</sup> And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?"<sup>15</sup> And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua,*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/spurgeon-and-the-cholera-outbreak-of-1854/>.



*“Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.*

Everything in Joshua 5 is teaching us the priority of worship. Joshua went out to get the lay of the land and plan the battle, but what he needed to do is hit pause and hit his knees before the Commander of the Lord’s Army. Joshua needed to remember that his task was a holy task, and it does not begin with doing more and trying harder. It begins with worship.

Think about it. All practical wisdom would have said that they needed to hit the ground running and attack while their enemies’ hearts were melting before them, but Yahweh didn’t want them to do that.

Yahweh was teaching His people that He fights their battles. Israel’s first three days in the Promised Land was a Sabbath for them. They didn’t hit the ground running. Instead, they went to war by going to worship.

It is the same for us. We must remember to worship on The Lord’s Day. It is tempting to spend the first day of the week working instead of going to worship.

God may have taken you through the river of difficulty and finally given you a new job, and now you want to impress your boss, so the practical thing to do seems like going to work but what you most need to do is worship Jesus.

Schoolwork may be pressing in on you, and you may have tests next week. Practically, it seems like sleeping late and studying all day on a Sunday is the smart thing to do but worshipping Jesus is what you most need to do.

Things may be coming apart at the seams in your life and burning the midnight oil seems like doing more and working harder is what you need to do. However, the priority of your life should be worshipping Jesus and remembering His promise never to leave you or forsake you.

Brothers and sisters, Sunday is no ordinary day. It is the day we gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ and remember the priority of the promises of God given to us in Christ.

If you neglect to worship, you will eventually forget to worship. To neglect worship to do something else is really saying to God that you can live your life in your own strength. Beware when your priorities are all out of order.