

The God of the Promise: A Holy People and a Holy God

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[0 : 00] I once visited a potter's workshop and the potter was giving a demonstration to a group of visitors. And he made it back into a lump.

And one of the visitors said, why? Why did you do that? You just spent so much time and effort. The pot looked great. And the potter said, well, the inside wasn't right.

The inside wasn't right. It would never hold what it was meant to hold, no matter how good it looked on the outside. It's better to remake it now than it collapses under pressure later on.

And in Joshua chapter 5, we see that God commands his people to pause. It's a big pause before they begin to conquer the land.

In chapter 4, they have just crossed over the River Jordan. God parted the water for them, as he had done at the Red Sea. And they were to march towards Jericho. But before that happened, God says, stop.

[1 : 23] There is something that must happen. I have commanded you to take the land, but something needs to happen first. Before they take Jericho, God wants them to consecrate themselves to his service.

Or we might say, before the people did God's work, God had a work to do in them. Before they would fight the Lord's battles, God was going to fight the battle for their heart and for their lives. He was going to work on their inside obedience to him before sending them to do the work externally, if you like, and in conquering the land. Before he worked through them, he needed to work in them.

In Joshua 4, tied to that, immediately after the people crossed the river, God tells them to remember him. So they set up memorial stones to remind themselves that God is the one who had delivered them across the water.

And you're thinking, what's the need for that? Surely, we would remind ourselves, we would know who did it. We didn't part the waters. Why do we need to set up a memorial? And it's because we are so prone to forget.

[2 : 35] Even as God's people, we are so prone to forget what he has done. So God says, build a memorial so that you can remember. And every time your children pass it, tell them what I did in bringing you into the land.

He didn't want them to focus on themselves, but very much on God. Because a poor spiritual memory is not just simply a poor spiritual memory. It's actually spiritual drifting of the heart. It's never just a matter of the mind. So in Joshua chapter 5 then, and looking at the work that God does in his people before doing it through them, I think we can see at least three things. First, God consecrates his people. Second, God provides for his people. And third, God calls his people to holiness.

So he consecrates them, he provides for them, and then he calls them to holiness of life. So first then, God consecrates his people. Verses 1 to 9.

[3 : 38] Verses 1 to 9. The people have now entered Canaan. They have remembered God by setting up the 12 memorial stones, one for each tribe.

But before they take up sword, God says, stop. Pause. God wants them to dedicate themselves to his service first.

Why? Because God realized, and God knows, that so often we can be busy doing the things of God, and our hearts actually are quite far away from God.

And God is not only concerned with external obedience, but internal obedience. You can be serving God faithfully, outwardly if you like, but if your heart is not in it, you are not honoring God.

In fact, the flow of that external obedience is coming from quite the wrong place. And the way God often does this is through means of a sign and seal of his covenant promises.

[4 : 39] Whenever God makes a promise in the Bible, there's a sign and seal accompanying it so that people can remind themselves of it. So you think of Noah, there's a rainbow across the sky. That's a reminder to the people of what God promised.

With Abraham, it's the sign of circumcision. With David, it's the royal throne. All the way through Moses, it's the law. But God gave these covenant signs that they would remember him.

For the Israelites, this was the sign of circumcision, wasn't it? Verses 2 and 3, we read, At that time the Lord said to Joshua, Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.

So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Ha'araloth. Here's the thing. Circumcision had not been practiced for nigh on 40 years.

This was the first time Israel practiced this sacrament for 40 years. It wasn't just a tradition of the people that had been forgotten.

[5 : 40] This was God's command to them, that the people were to be circumcised. But for 40 years, this was probably unable to happen.

The circumcision was the visible sign that a person belonged, or that the male line anyway at that time, belonged to the covenant people of God. Established a way back by God to Abraham in Genesis 17.

It was a sign that these people were to be cut off. Circumcision literally is a separation. It's a cutting off from the world and a turning to God.

But there is a contrast in these verses. The generation that had come out of Egypt, they had received the sign. They were all circumcised.

But verse 5 makes that very clear. But they did not obey the Lord's voice. Verse 6. Those who had received the sign didn't obey. Despite having the external mark, they remained rebellious in their hearts.

[6 : 46] And as a result, they are finished off in the wilderness. In contrast, the new generation had not received the sign of the covenant.

These were the ones that God raised up to enter the land. Verse 7 makes that clear. So God now commands them to receive the sign and reaffirm the covenant he had made with Abraham.

There was nothing wrong with the sign. It was God's command. That wasn't the problem. The problem rested in the hearts of the people. And God's command must now still be obeyed.

So now he's saying to them, essentially we're going back to the beginning. It's a fresh start. Now receive the covenant sign as your ancestors had done. The difference is very important.

Because the mark of circumcision was not a guarantee of salvation. Circumcising someone did not make them a believer. The presence of the sign did not mean the presence of faith.

[7 : 46] The outward sign pointed to a greater inner reality. A heart that belongs to God. What was the command accompanying circumcision? The apostle picks it out in the New Testament as well.

It's to be circumcision of the heart. It was always that. It was always that. And you see the same idea in the New Testament with baptism.

Baptism is the new covenant sign or one of them. A beautiful picture of belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ. But baptism in and of itself does not save.

That's why in Protestant churches anyway, we don't bring our children for christening. I hear it all the time. We do not bring our children for christening.

We bring them for baptism. Christening is a Roman Catholic practice. I've got no authority or power to christen anyone. No minister has. Can't do it. I can't make someone a believer.

[8 : 48] And the water that we use comes from the kitchen tap. That's where the water comes from. It's not special holy water that we bring in. It's not the water that saves.

It points to the one who can. And baptism must be accompanied by faith to have any effect. The sign of circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New have no value in and of themselves unless we follow their pointing, their signs.

You ever thought of them? Maybe you still get them in Glasgow. It's been six years since I left the congregation here to go to Dumplain. But in Glasgow you used to stand and have people standing with signs all you can eat buffet this way.

So maybe you still do. I've not been down Buchanan Street for a little while. But see it's still there. You're walking down Buchanan Street all you can eat buffet this way. I'm very hungry. You stand and look at the sign. They've used a fantastic font.

There's bold there. I really like those colours. And you stand there for an hour examining the sign and think this is great. You've still got an empty tummy. You're still hungry. But if you're to follow that sign to where it's pointing and sit yourself there and eat of the buffet you've fulfilled the need that you had.

[10:02] And it's the same with baptism and we're going to come to it in a minute. It's exactly the same with the Lord's Supper. You must follow the sign accompanied by faith and look to Jesus to whom these two signs point.

Paul puts it starkly in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 doesn't he? That we just read from. Even though the Israelites passed through the sea they ate the manna from heaven they drank the water from the rock they followed the cloud of God's presence with most of them God was not pleased is what the apostle says.

They experienced miracles. They had signs but many of them lacked saving faith. And the same danger exists today. You might be around the things of God.

You might have been attending church for decades. You've been baptised even. You have professed faith. Perhaps you're on the communion roll. Perhaps you hold office in the church. But the vital question is do you belong to Christ? That's the question. Do you belong to the Lord Jesus?

[11:12] Have you been made in him? You know it's dangerously easy to put our confidence in external things. Even good things. And miss the inward reality of faith in the Lord Jesus.

Or let's put it this way. If I were to ask you why are you a Christian? What would your answer be? Would you say I made a profession of faith?

Or I go to church? Or I was baptised? Because none of those things make you a Christian. A Christian would do those things.

It doesn't make you a Christian. Or would you say with Paul as Paul was asked that question because Christ lives in me I have been crucified with him and I no longer live but he lives in me.

That was Paul's answer to that. You see if we're going to answer that question because of what we did we've gone wrong. Rather because of what Christ has done. What he has done on the cross.

[12:15] And our faith is in him. Our hope must be rooted not in ceremony or in tradition but in the saviour. Christ alone saves.

And that was a lesson that the Israelites had to learn for 40 years in the wilderness. So God calls the people to remember now the covenant promises made to Abraham and to receive the sign of the covenant as a way of consecrating them to God's service.

And he's really asking that their hearts would be circumcised. This is not simply the external act. Deuteronomy 30 actually says it doesn't it? The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts that's what Moses said so that you may love him with all your heart.

And that's what we need. Not just the outward sign as precious as those are but the inward renewal that these signs testify to. So what does God do in Joshua 5?

He brings the people back to the covenant a way back to Abraham. He calls them to recommit. He gives them the sign. He reshapes their identity as those who are his and he in effect says to them you belong to me now behave as those who belong to me.

[13:31] Don't forget what I have taught you. You are now in the land but I am still the same God who looked after you for 40 years in the wilderness. So let's make good on our baptism.

Let's make good on our baptism not by relying on the act itself but by embracing the one that it points to. Here is the thing we are pedo-baptists unashamedly we give the covenant sign to our children.

When was the last time we said to our covenant children you were baptized? When was the last time we spoke to them that the covenant sign has been laid upon them? Or is it just something we do maybe when they are less than a year old we give them the sign and that is all we hear about it. If we genuinely believe that and we accompany it with the faith that it points to we are going to remind them that they have received the covenant sign and as a baptized child there is a difference in how you should live your life.

You have received the covenant sign of God upon you so let's make good on that. If you are baptized but are far from God follow the sign of baptism you are washed clean it points to the one who makes you clean.

[14 : 43] If you have never trusted in Christ then come to him today where you are right now be cleansed be made new and live by faith in the son of God who loved you and who gave himself for you. They are to consecrate themselves before the work.

Well again in verses 10 and 12 secondly God provides for his people. He's just consecrated them to himself through circumcision and it's only when this is done that he commands them to celebrate the Passover.

Verse 10 says on that evening of the 14th day of the month while encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho the Israelites celebrated the Passover. Here is the second covenant sign of the Old Testament circumcision Passover.

The last time Israel had celebrated this meal was 37 years before. They hadn't celebrated it in the wilderness either.

The last time they celebrated it was at Mount Sinai and this was a consequence of their disobedience and the wilderness they didn't have bread or the wine to celebrate it with they were in the wilderness because of sinning against God so God took away from them the ability to celebrate his great deliverance from Egypt.

[15 : 59] You want to sin? I'm going to take away the remembrance of what I did among you. And this was a privilege they had forfeited just as they had with circumcision.

But now this new generation begins life in the land by remembering the Passover the deliverance from Pharaoh king of Egypt. here's something else.

Are we ever complacent when it comes to baptism and the Lord's Supper? Israel was with their two signs and God took them away for 40 years an entire generation.

And the question that challenges me if the church was to stop baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper today would we notice?

Would we feel the effect of that? Or is it just something we give ourselves to because we know that we should maybe three or four times a year? That's a challenge because if we're taking the sacraments seriously we're not going to do that.

[17 : 06] We're going to have the accompanying faith that points us to the Saviour. And of course it's important that the Passover comes after the circumcision after the covenant sign has been renewed we remember.

And of course there'll be rounds through the New Testament those who are baptised really only should be partaking of the Lord's Supper. Here the people are remembering God's past salvation his mighty rescue from Egypt and they're doing so having freshly recommitted themselves to him. God doesn't just throw his people into battle he nourishes them by spiritual food as the Passover was the sacraments are spiritual food for our soul but only if they're accompanied by faith and that's why God pauses them before they go into battle.

He says pause and he feeds them and that's what these sacraments are we are feasting on the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and that should build us up it should build us up but then something new happens in Joshua 5 for the first time in their lives these people eat the produce of the land as verse 11 says this is not wilderness food but food from Canaan and then at the same time something old stops the manna ceases as verse 12 says can you imagine that for 40 whole years all these people had known was manna from heaven and quail that's all they had had manna and quail they'd grown up on it not baked beans and toast but manna and quail that's what they grew up on and as they enter the land stop never to be eaten again never to come again and what God does now he feeds them from the produce of Canaan the land flowing with milk and honey in other words he provides for them according to his purposes and timing manna was for the wilderness the land's produce is for the time in Canaan but both of those things show God's faithfulness and there's a danger that we can look back at what we might call manna seasons in our lives when we look back and think you know that's when

God was really blessing me it was back then that's when I had the blessing of God it's in those dramatic moments when I knew God was answering my prayers when there was clear guidance when the word of God was alive in my heart and mind I was on a spiritual high but what about when the manna stops or you don't feel like that has God changed has God forgotten his promises has he forgotten to be faithful no he's still the same that's what he was saying to them here I'm still the

same God I am the same God what about when life becomes ever more ordinary the routine of work family church and there doesn't seem to be any miracle if you like in sight God's provision hasn't stopped the God of the manna is also the God of the grain of the land the spiritual maturity he desires for his people isn't earned only in moments of crisis but in the slow faithful trust of the ordinary everyday experiences of believers it's the plodding away every single day

[20 : 31] God does give other times of course you grow all of a sudden but no it's the little everyday growth you know maybe if you think of young children as parents because we're with them all the time you see growth but you don't see it maybe as quickly as the grandparents who may become once a week or once a month or whatever and someone else sees them after a year wow your parents you're like well yes but you don't see it quite as much but it's that slow everyday growth that God so often works and maybe you feel like that at the moment the spiritual highs aren't there you feel more in the valleys than on the mountaintops things seem quiet don't think for a moment that God has left you if you're still faithfully serving him don't think that he has left you spiritual maturity often looks like trusting God's ordinary means of grace and I come back to this time and time over again the word of God the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper fellowship regular fellowship with his people and daily obedience and holiness of life these are the things

God has promised to bless are you only trusting in God when he provides miraculously or are you learning to trust him when the provision feels quite ordinary can you still thank him when the manna stops and you need to bake the bread from the grain of the land instead and then finally God calls his people to holiness verses 13 to 15 just when we think the people are now ready to march towards Jericho circumcised consecrated fed and in the land something else surprising happens Joshua finds himself face to face with a man standing opposite him with a drawn sword verse 13 the sword is drawn now can you imagine Joshua's instinct he's a soldier he's a leader he's now the mantle has gone to him from Moses Joshua is preparing his people to attack Jericho so he does what any commander I think would do he confronts the man and says to him the obvious question are you for us or are you for our enemies but the answer he receives stops him in his tracks the ESV has no the NIV has neither but it was an either or question

Joshua posed wasn't it it demanded one or the other or it seemed to demand one or the other you're either for us or you're against us so which is it and the man says neither no but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come is it an either or in a way it is but in another way it's not you see the point this figure is making is that God is not merely aligning himself with our side you know it's well said that in battle if every side believes the Lord is on their side whose side is God on and the person here is saying no I am the commander of the Lord and the question Joshua is whose side are you on that's always the question not is God on our side but are we on his side are we on God's side no that question was to make God some kind of divine assistant to Joshua's campaign but God is the one who leads them into battle he is the commander and this mysterious figure is most likely a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord

Jesus Christ himself who is the commander of the armies of heaven and the reason we can say that is that Joshua bows down and worships him and doesn't get rebuked for it if this was an angel he would not have received the worship of Joshua but more than that the man says to Joshua at the end take off your sandals from your feet the ground you're standing on is holy ground there is only one presence that makes ground holy ground that is the presence of the Lord God himself and this would have been a bells to Joshua he was one of the only people who could remember what had happened under Moses Moses the same thing was said to him Exodus 3 Moses Moses take off your sandals the ground you are on is holy ground and here we see again before the people go into the battle here I believe is the second person of the trinity saying I am going ahead of you into the battle

I am going ahead of you I am fighting this battle for you all you have to do is obey and trust and Joshua's response is the only right one he falls down on the ground face down prostrate in reverence he doesn't argue he doesn't negotiate terms he worships he realizes that this is not a mere man this is something altogether holy something altogether holy this is holy ground and that's the point before God brings down Jericho's walls he brings Joshua down to his knees before the Lord works through us he wants us to be dependent he desires to be dependent and we trust when we are raising our children what are we seeking to do we're seeking to make them as independent from us as possible that's good parenting anyway isn't it so you teach them how to put on their

jacket or how to maybe help make their breakfast or put things away in the house you want to make them independent as hard as a parent of course it is but that's what we seek to do but in the [26 : 29] Christian life the opposite is really true we grow in dependence on God that's how you grow in your faith it's a growth in dependence to become less independent that's sinful to declare God independence it's an increase in growth in dependence and that's what God teaches Joshua here you're going to have to trust me Joshua because this is not going to be easy and the Christian life is not easy the Christian life is not easy but every single Lord's day we get to rededicate to refresh recommit to know that God goes on before us Jesus goes on before us and we can go ahead into the week because of what he has done and on occasions like this we remember the Lord's death and practice baptism of course until he should come again and this encounter teaches us that what God requires from us the most as his people isn't strategy it's not it's not strength I can do this I'll work it up inside myself no it's not courage it's holiness it's dedication of life he will give the courage he will give the strength he will do all of that he asks us to revere him to surrender to him because

God's work is not accomplished by people who are self-reliant but by those who are God dependent he doesn't need Joshua's might he needs Joshua's heart before leading Israel to victory Joshua must bow before the Lord the commander of heaven's armies and the danger is to think that we can serve God well but remain spiritually cold that we can go out into battle for the Lord without bowing the knee to him in worship but God calls his people first and foremost to holiness what does it say in the New Testament without holiness no one will see the Lord no one will see it to recognize that his presence is holy and the ground we stand on wherever he is is not common but is holy too that is why look at the New Testament epistles the apostle Paul calls us saints if you're a believer in Christ this morning you're a saint that's what the

Bible says not that you're you go about telling everyone you're perfect that's not a saint but a saint is someone who's holy who's called out from the world to live for God they belong to him hence the signs of baptism and the Lord's supper they're practiced by believers and the signs given to their children as well to here is the challenge for us all today then especially as we remember the sacrament are you am I rushing ahead to do before God I challenge myself with this often especially in ministry just get up on a Monday morning this is the routine go for it maybe we do that from time to time but then say Lord what do you want me to do this week what do you I've got my own plans but what do you want me to do to ask him are you am

I assuming that he is on your side my side or are we bowing before him that we are on his side to do his work you see God doesn't bless our agendas God doesn't march to our drumbeat but he calls us to submit to him and that begins with reverence worship and a willingness to take off our sandals from our feet to let go of whatever makes us feel secure and to say with the voice Samuel speak Lord for your servant is listening and the same lesson is vital for Christians today holiness is not an optional extra in the Christian life it's not but it's the environment by which God's power is displayed if you have truly come to Christ you're the fruit of that will be evident and viewed and growing in your life the holy God will not march with unholy hearts the battle ahead requires more than courage it requires consecration God never says to us you need to do better he never says to us pick up your socks muster your courage work up your own strength he doesn't say any of that that is not in the gospel he says come to me all you here weary and

I will give you rest your strength your weakness and your weakness my strength is made perfect that's what the gospel says it says come as you are come in your weakness come in your failure come in your short comings come with all of your faults come to Jesus and he is the one who will make it right before Jericho falls we must fall before him and as in the Christian life it's a battle Christian life is a battle to fight the good fight with all as we battle in the Christian life against sin the world and the devil not Jericho but the sin the world and the devil may we take comfort that the Lord who was with Joshua here is with us as well and as our sin the world and the devil are the!

[31 : 44] three great enemies that come against us let's remind ourselves that Jesus is the righteousness of God he is the one who says take heart because I have overcome the world that's why I want to be on his side I don't want to be on his side he's done it he's the victor I want to be on his side take heart I've overcome the world and be strengthened that the serpent crushing king will one day overthrow Satan and throw him into the deepest pit of hell far away from the people of God for all eternity he's done it Jesus has done it may we be a people who take God seriously who walk humbly who pursue holiness not as a burden but as a calling because the Lord who leads us is holy

and he calls us to be like him before God brings down the walls he works on the hearts of his people he consecrates them he calls them to renew the covenant not just outwardly but in inward faith he provides for them teaching them to trust in him even when the provision looks different he calls them to holiness remind them that his is the victory and not their warfare so then have you bowed the knee before the true commander of!

armies Jesus Christ have you trusted not in the signs not in your spiritual heritage but in the saviour who gave himself for you come to him be consecrated by his grace be fed by his provision and walk in his holiness!

because the ground in which we stand in him is still holy ground let's pray father god we commit ourselves to you this morning just as we are we turn away from all that is unholy as baptism reminds us we can come only to you for the cleansing!

for the washing away of our sin and Lord as we remember the sacrament this morning of your death before you come again we pray Lord Jesus Christ he would help us to remember that death and in so doing to turn away from all that's unholy to feast upon you the bread of heaven and to be reinvigorated to go out and fight the good fight of faith that we with the apostle could say that laid up for us as that crown of life that we have fought the good fight we have finished the race we have kept the faith in Jesus name we pray Amen