

God's Promise & a Fresh Start

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[0 : 00] I'm going to pray for us so let's pray. Dear God thanks so much for your word the Bible. Thank you that you continue to speak to us through it even through passages that at first glance look odd like tonight's one and so far we pray that you'd give us minds to understand your word and hearts that would seek to live in light of it before we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

Well people love fresh starts in life. Our girls have got two daughters and they have a dance concert coming up in November and so they've been practicing for it at home but every time they make a mistake they say start again start again. Now I've tried to be an interested father but after seeing the start of their dance 12 times I suddenly had to make a phone call. But people like having do-overs in life don't they? Fresh starts whether it's a change in career, a change in look, a new haircut perhaps, a change of wardrobe or even a change in location. One of my wife's favorite TV shows is Escape to the Country. Has anyone seen that show? No I'm just old. Okay it's all about having a fresh start or new life in another country and today we see God give his people a fresh start.

You see in chapter 1 we saw Joshua tell Israel to prepare for battle and then about six days later they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land and you might remember from last week God parted the Jordan River like he parted the Red Sea. And if we remember last week God did this so that all might fear him. So if you've got your Bibles there just have a look at the last couple of verses of chapter 4. Chapter 4 verse 23 and 24. So 23 bottom left hand corner there.

For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we crossed over.

Now here's the purpose of it. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God. You see God did this mighty act and it was a mighty act. So mighty in fact I remember reading one commentary writer who said that it was impossible for this to happen naturally. And so it must be just a metaphor you know just picture language and not real. He later admitted in his commentary that he did not believe in miracles.

[2 : 43] I'm not sure why he's writing Bible commentaries. But you see if God is real then this is precisely the sort of thing you'd expect to see him do in history. If he never did any miracles in the past then you know you've got to want is he really God. But he did this precisely so that people would know that he is God and fear him. And that's what happens in chapter 5 verse 1. Do you see there?

Chapter 5 verse 1. Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they crossed over.

Well look what happened. Their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites. See the nations hear of what God has done and their hearts melt in fear. They know the God of Israel is powerful and so the purpose of God's act has started to have its effect you see. Though as we'll see later the fear of these kings does not mean they will convert to being one of God's people like Rahab did a couple of weeks ago. Sadly they will stubbornly fight against God like so many people still do today. But for the moment God's mighty act has had its intended purpose on these foreign kings hasn't it? But has it had its intended purpose on Israel?

Do they fear God too? Remember 424? God's act was so that the peoples of the earth might know that he is powerful. Chapter 5 verse 1. Tick. Done. They know it. But the other purpose in 424 is so that you Israelites might also fear God. That is trust and obey God. And so do they. Well we'll see in a moment. But for now our passage really begins in verse 2 with the command to get circumcised. So point 1 verse 2. At that time the Lord said to Joshua make flint knives and circumcise the

Israelites again. That's not the same people twice. It's talking about the new generation. So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haraloth. Now I'm assuming everyone here knows what circumcision is. I'm not going to put up any diagrams. Don't worry. But it is the cutting off of some excess skin on the male private part. That's as far as I'm going. Known as the foreskin. And it was a common practice in the ancient world. I mean if you look in your Bibles at what the name Gibeath Haraloth means.

[5 : 15] Have a look at footnote D. It suggests that this was the place that circumcision happened. The place of day surgery for guys if you like. Perhaps because it's near river for water. Who knows. But it seems that God deliberately leads his people to this place. It's a different place where he led the first generation. He deliberately it seems leads his people to this place and then tells Joshua to make some knives and circumcise all the men. Now they're just about to do battle right? And what's more verse one says the kings are melting in fear. So what better time would there be to attack? But instead of saying attack God says get circumcised. Surely this has to be the one of the most bizarre military tactics ever.

Though we'll see another one next week. But why on earth does God tell them to do this? Well Joshua our narrator tells us. Have a look at verse 4. He says now this is why he did so. All those who came out of Egypt or the men of military age that was 20 years old and above. They died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not or during the 40 years.

The Israelites had moved about the wilderness 40 years until all the men who were military age when they left Egypt had died since they had not obeyed the Lord. For the Lord had sworn to them that they would not see the land he had solemnly promised their ancestors to give us a land flowing with milk and honey. And so he raised up their sons in their place. And these were the ones that Joshua circumcised.

They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way. And after the whole nation had been circumcised they remained there where they were until they were healed.

[7 : 17] You see the first generation out of Egypt did not obey God when they came to the promised land the first time. And so they wandered the desert for 40 years until as it says those of military age 20 years old and older died. But during the 40 years of wandering a new generation was born and these says Joshua are the ones who had not yet been circumcised.

Now that's all well and good but it still hasn't really answered my question why on earth do they need to do this in the first place? I mean why is circumcision such a big deal anyway?

I mean it's going to hurt at the men at least. And you know what us men are like with pain?

Hopeless. That's why we have our own special colds called man colds which is just a normal cold but we act as though it's worse because we're hopeless with pain. What's more this circumcision is going to take time to heal? And they're actually now behind enemy lines. They're in the promised land.

They could be attacked at any moment and if they were attacked then the men are not going to be much use in a fight. So why is this circumcision such a big deal? Well because it was a sign that they that you're a part of God's people. That you're in a covenant relationship with God. That's what God said to Abraham in Genesis 17 which is on the next slide. He said it's a sign between me and you of the covenant. It's kind of like a wedding ring which is a sign of marriage relationship between a man and a woman. And so Israel was to be circumcised as a sign of their relationship between them and God where they were God's precious people whom he wanted to bless. I remember the job three blessings promised to Abraham and he was their God whom they were to fear. And so what God is really doing here is making a fresh start with this new generation. You see God is determined to have a people whom he can bless and who will fear him. And we get a glimpse of this in verse 6 and 7. Have a look there in verse 6 and 7. The Israelites had moved about the wilderness 40 years until they all died out. Why? Well since they had not obeyed the Lord. And then verse 7. So what did God do? Verse 7. So he raised up their sons in their place and these were the ones that Joshua circumcised. You see the first generation did not obey God.

They did not fear God. And so they're not allowed to enter the land. But what does God do in verse 7? Well he raises up another generation in their place. Why? Because he's determined to have a people whom he can bless and who will fear him. He really wants these people whom he can bless and who will fear him. And so he raises up this next generation and makes a fresh start with them

by having them circumcised. And God even makes sure that the foreign king's hearts are melting and so they don't attack while he's making this fresh start with them. And God's fresh start is for all those in this new generation who will fear him, who will trust and obey him. I mean presumably they could have run away when they saw Joshua coming towards them with a knife. But they don't. They accept this offer of a fresh start and get circumcised as a sign of the covenant relationship. And so God declares this fresh start with them in verse 9. You see verse 9? Then God said to Joshua, today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. So the place has been called Gilgal to this day. God says their circumcision has signaled that he has made a fresh start with them, that he has rolled away the reproach and the shame of Egypt as the skin is rolled away. I don't mean to be graphic but that's the connection.

[11 : 08] In fact that's what the word Gilgal means in your footnote. It means to roll. And the reproach of Egypt, well it refers to the insults of Egypt. You see it seemed as though Egypt laughed at Israel in the desert because it looked like God saved them from Egypt only to let them die in the desert.

Israel became a bit of a laughing stock for following this God out of Egypt only to end up wandering around aimlessly it seemed in the desert. Of course the real reason was that that first generation did not fear or obey God. But now that this new generation is here, now that they are standing in the promised land, now that they have accepted God's offer of a fresh start, well God declares that all that reproach, all that ridicule, all that shame has now been dealt with, rolled away, fresh start. And in response, the people celebrate their salvation and enjoy God's blessings.

Which brings us to the Passover, point 2 verse 10. On the evening of the 14th day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened bread and roasted grain.

Now the Passover was the meal that the Israelites had just before they left Egypt. They killed a lamb and roasted it. A few weeks ago, I mentioned that my favourite meal was roast lamb and someone in the congregation quickly whispered, typical for a minister, you know, connection with the Passover and everything. I thought it was very quick. But for the Israelites, more important than roast lamb was the blood of the lamb. For the blood was what saved them from the angel of death, you might remember. So remember, Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go from Egypt and the Israelites were like God's firstborn son. That's what he says in Exodus. And so in judgment, God sent an angel of death to take all the Egyptian firstborn sons, since they would not let God's firstborn son Israel go.

But the blood of the lamb would save the firstborn sons of the Israelites. And so I think on the next slide is a kind of just an illustration of what they would, they did. They put the lamb's blood on the doorframes of their houses. And then when the angel of death saw the blood, it would pass over their house, hence Passover. And so it was this final plague, the angel of death that forced Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. It was this plague with the Passover that God used to save his people. So he could bring them to this land where he could bless them, where they could serve him with fear in trust and obedience. And now that this new generation are finally in the land, it's as though the purpose of the Passover has finally been realized in full.

[14 : 08] And so they celebrate it because their escape from Egypt has finally been complete, you see. In fact, what happens here is a kind of a reverse of what happened in Egypt. So on the next slide, I think it is when the first generation left on the next slide, Egypt, they had a Passover in Egypt, then they crossed the Red Sea, and it was meant to go straight to the crossing of the Jordan with the Passover in the land. It was meant to kind of come full circle. But you had this 40-year pause, so to speak, because the first generation disobeyed God. But now that it has come full circle, now that they are in the land, the people bring the Passover to completion. They celebrate it because the purpose has finally been reached. They are now in the land, the land that God rescued them from Egypt to go into. It's come full circle, you see. But the question is, how will this generation respond to this fresh start? We've seen that they celebrate the Passover, but will they keep fearing God?

Or will they be like their parents who disobeyed God? Will God's purpose back in 424 be accomplished with them? Well, we get a hint here in verse 10 that they do fear God. Because in verse 10, they seem to be the ones to take the initiative to celebrate the Passover. You see, in your Bibles, in verse 2, God takes the initiative through Joshua to make a fresh start. The people are

pretty much passive the whole time. Even in verse 8, the circumcision is done to them. They are passive. It's all God's initiative through Joshua. But then in verse 10, the focus shifts from God to the people.

In fact, in verse 10, there's no mention of God or Joshua. Rather, it seems like the people have taken the initiative. It seems like this is part of their response to God's fresh start, you see. What's more, notice in verse 10 how the narrator tells us exactly when they celebrate the Passover, on the evening of the 14th day of the month. Now, why does Joshua include that detail? It seems a bit odd. Well, because that's exactly when God's law told them to celebrate the Passover. So on the next slide, we read in Leviticus chapter 23. That should be one from Leviticus, I hope. Nope. Okay, let me read to you. Leviticus 23 verse 5. It says, That's what God's law said. And that's what the people do. You see, they are obedient to God's law. The narrator seems to deliberately record the time that people celebrate the Passover because he wants to show that they are obeying God's law, that they are fearing him. And at the same time, they also enjoy the blessings that come from having a fresh start with God. See verse 11?

[17:18] The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land. There was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan. Now, we're told here three times that they ate the food or produce of the land. And the point is, a fresh start with God comes with the blessings of God. In this case, the food of the land. And so, what we have here is God offering a fresh start with this new generation because he really wants to have a people whom he can bless and who will obey him. And this new generation accepts this offer by passively being circumcised. And then they respond to this fresh start by actively fearing God, obeying his law, keeping the Passover.

And at the same time, they then enjoy God's blessings of the produce in the land. And far from being a military tactic, an odd military tactic, this is precisely what the people need to remember before they face other nations in the land like Jericho. When they face daunting odds, they need to remember that God has made a fresh start with them. That they are his people and he is their God. That he is keen to bless them. And they, in response, are to fear him, no matter how daunting the task. What does all this then mean for us? Well, I want to suggest three things. First, just as God offers the Israelites a fresh start through Joshua, so he offers us one through Jesus. You see, God still wants more people to be his people, whom he can bless and who will fear him. And so God offers everyone a fresh start with him. And the way we accept this offer is by being circumcised, not physically, but spiritually, by believing in Jesus. Turn to your second reading, page 1183. And let me show you from here. I'll pick it up at verse 11. Verse 11 and 12.

So in Christ, you will also, notice, circumcised, but with a circumcision not performed by human hands, not a physical one. Rather, your whole self ruled by the flesh, your sinful nature was put off when you were circumcised by Christ. Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead. Now, it's quite dense language here, and I don't have time to unpack it all, but Paul's point is that when Christ died, when he was metaphorically circumcised, that is, when his body was cut off from the land of the living, his death paid for our sin. And our sinful nature can now be circumcised or cut off. That is, we can be freed from having to follow our sinful nature. Indeed, we now have God's spirit such that we can choose to follow God instead, which we never would have done before. What's more, we are freed from the penalty of sin as well. You see, verse 13, he kind of puts it in slightly different language. He says, when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us. He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

Seeing Christ, God gives us a fresh start or a new life with him. He frees us from having to follow our sinful nature and he frees us from the debt our sins owed. It's like one time I borrowed a DVD from the video store. You know those stores that used to exist before Netflix and iTunes? Well, we forgot to take one of the kids' DVDs back and so we accumulated a reasonable late fee on our account. Now, I was at the counter hiring another DVD for the kids and the person at the counter told me that I had to pay the debt. Now, I had conveniently left my wallet in the car and only had grabbed the \$5 note because movies, funnily enough, were cheaper back then. And so I just had this note and I couldn't pay the debt. My wallet was in the car. But then the person said, look,

actually, don't worry about it.

I'll cancel it. I said, what? Are you sure? So surprised I asked if he was sure. You should never do that. You just take it. But I said, are you sure? I was surprised. And he said, yeah, I'm the owner. I can do that. And the owner basically paid my debt for me. And then on the computer, he wiped my account clean. So there was no more charge that I owed. I had a fresh start on my account. That's what God offers everyone. Slaters wiped clean, sins forgiven, a fresh start and a new life with him. [22 : 56] Because Jesus pays for our sins instead. And to accept this fresh start, we simply need to believe it. We need to trust in Jesus, whose death paid for our sins so that our debt can be cancelled.

And so the first question for us then is, have you accepted God's offer of a fresh start? Have you put your faith in Jesus? And even for us who have, then we can continue to have fresh starts with God. Slaters wiped clean every time we pray for forgiveness. I don't know what's going on in your lives at the moment. We said a confession at the beginning of the service. But if you are struggling with some particular sin in your life, then say sorry, ask for a fresh start and God will bring it. He will give it. And then ask for his help not to do it again. We can keep coming back time and time again for a fresh start. But it's only through Jesus. And so again, do you believe in him?

That's the first thing. Second thing is for us who do believe in Jesus, who have been given a fresh start, then it means we are to respond the same way that that new generation of Israelites did. We are to continue to fear God. Or as Paul puts it here in Colossians, we are to continue living our lives in Christ. Do you see verse 6 there?

So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness. We are to keep following Christ as our Lord. We are to stick with him and not be carried away by some other teaching or the things of this world, whether money or career or a non-Christian you'd like to date and so on. In response to our fresh start, we are to continue fearing God in trust and obedience.

[24 : 52] There's a guy at my old church who had not long become a Christian and he got engaged to a girl in the congregation and his friends, who were mainly non-Christians, threw him a bucks party.

And because most of them were non-Christians, they hired a dancer. But he told his friends he didn't want any part of it because it would not be pleasing to God. And his friends, they paid him out for it and they pressured him and told him not to be such as stuck in the mud and so on.

But he ended up walking out on his own bucks party. Why? Because he feared God more than his friends. You see, fearing the God who has given us a fresh start at the cost of his only son means following him over the world, even sometimes over our friends. And thirdly, we are to enjoy God's blessings with thankfulness. Our blessings are not eating the produce of the land, but they are being spiritually full in Christ. So look at verse 9 in Colossians 2. For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form. And in Christ, you have been brought to fullness. You have fullness. See, Paul is saying if we're in Christ, if we are Christians who have God's spirit, then we can't get any closer to God spiritually than we already are. One day physically we'll get closer to God, yes, but not spiritually.

You are already spiritually as close to God as possible. And if you're in Christ, if you're a Christian, then you cannot get any more loved by God than you already are. We have all his love, whether we realize it or not. And if you are a Christian, then you cannot have any more security of heaven than you already have. You have an ironclad guarantee. If you are in Christ, you cannot be any more in God's family than you already are now. For in God's eyes, you're actually equal with Christ, did you realize? We are co-heirs with Christ, says the Bible, and we will judge the world with Christ, did you realize? We will even rule the new creation with Christ.

Christ. And in Christ, we have life eternal. And you cannot get any more life than life that is eternal, can you? In other words, we cannot be any more spiritually blessed than we already are in Christ. Paul puts it like this in the next slide, which is the verse that Devin actually started with tonight. I think this one is, yep. God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. And I've said this in the morning congregation before, if we have every spiritual blessing in Christ, then how many do we lack? None. We have every one. We're full. In Christ, we've been brought to spiritual fullness, you see. Oh, sure, we'd like a few more physical blessings, no doubt. You know, half a million dollars would be nice. Doesn't seem to go much these days, maybe a

million dollars. But those physical blessings only last a lifetime. These spiritual ones last an eternity. And we have every single one of them, did you realize? You see, when we accept a fresh start with God by believing in Jesus, we are to respond by continuing to fear Christ, to live our lives in him. But we also respond by enjoying God's blessings, remembering what we actually have in Christ. Being encouraged by these things. Being driven to joyful thanks for these things. Well, let me finish with a story about a couple from our 1030 service. I mentioned them this morning at the 1030 service, actually. This man, great encouragement, he suffers from leukemia.

[28 : 46] And if that's not enough, he also has Parkinson's disease. And in case two diseases is not enough, his wife also has MS. And yet, whenever I speak to him, he often says one of two things.

He says, I'm still trusting the Lord, Andrew. Or, God is still good. And I was speaking to them before the service this morning, and I was saying how encouraging they were to keep trusting, to keep fearing like this. And they responded with these words. They said, well, where else have we got to go when Christ has the words of eternal life? And we have every blessing in him. Where else would you go?

Here are some people in our church that were here this morning in this room, and they continue to not only fear God by trusting in him, but to enjoy the blessings that they know they have in him. May we do the same. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder that you are a God who loves to give people fresh starts. And Father, we pray that in response to the fresh start that you've given us through Christ, that you would help us to keep fearing you in trust and obedience, and that we would rejoice, that we would remember and rejoice over the amazing blessings we have in him.

Help us in this, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.