

Be Strong

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[0 : 00] We had a baptism family here this morning and so we had a number of guests in our church service and I saw this passage coming a few weeks ago and I thought, oh wow, Joshua 5 and the name that Steve stumbled over the minute ago in how to pronounce it, I'm not even going to bother with the pronunciation, I'm just going to tell you it means hill of foreskins which gives you some sort of an idea of the passage that we're about to enter into.

Our preaching passage, it's Joshua 5, it's MA rated, there's no other way to say it, mass circumcision of adult men. One of the features of the passage is that the place where all the action happens comes to be known as the hill of foreskins.

So I've got your attention now, we'll see where we go from here. I told a small group of friends on my dilemma in preaching today, we were at dinner a week or two ago and they very helpfully told me a whole series of circumcision jokes and I can't tell any of them tonight.

But if any of them were here I could say something like number two and they would laugh because they'd know which joke that was. So in the meantime, let's move into it.

Arnold Palmer was one of golf's greatest players and he tells a story about overconfidence. He says, I knew that I lost my focus.

[1 : 52] And on the next two shots I hit the ball into the sand trap and then put it over the edge of the green. I missed a putt and I lost the masters. Overconfidence, pride, self-sufficiency can trip us in a moment.

A preacher I know told me the story travelling home with his wife in the car after preaching one Sunday. Now this is a preacher problem, not your problem necessarily.

And he was fairly self-assured that he'd preached well. He'd done a good job that day. And she seemed quiet and angry and withdrawn. And so he tried to turn the conversation back to church that morning.

Peter told me how much he appreciated my message and how it helped him with something they'd been struggling with. Hmm. Said his wife.

And they travelled in silence for a few more minutes. And he tries again. Darling, like, how many great preachers do you think there are in the world? Long pause, more thought.

[3 : 02] And then she reflectively says, one less than what you've currently got in mind. Power, success can be suddenly followed by pride and overconfidence and self-sufficiency and fall.

When you get to Joshua 5, 6th book in the Bible, Israel has begun to taste power and success in large measure. Big things are going on.

They've wandered in the desert for 40 years. It's 440 years since they've been in the land. And in chapter 4, maybe 3 million refugees have crossed the Jordan River in a dramatic entry into the land.

And the passage Steve took us into last week was this passage where God stopped the flooding river. So the flooding Jordan River stopped it in its tracks and the people walked across a dry riverbed and into the land.

And the impact on the surrounding nations is stupendous. Joshua 5, verse 1. 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 we'd crossed over, their hearts melted and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.

[4 : 29] They're petrified. They're terrified for what the future holds. Now there's been this change of status for the people of Israel.

They've been the hicks in the desert. And they are now the line at the door. And they have become a feared enemy and a vast multitude is in the land and they're on the front veranda and they're about to sweep all before it.

And verse 9, the Lord said to Joshua, Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. God has brought these people full circle. They failed 40 years ago.

The nation rebelled against God and against Moses. God was ready to kill the nation except for Moses. And Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the rebels. Numbers chapter 14, he said this.

This is Moses to God. If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report will, about you, they're going to say the Lord was not able to bring these people into the land which he promised them on oath and so he slaughtered them in the desert.

[5 : 36] Moses was concerned about God's name and about God's reputation. He doesn't want God to act in a way which would cause unbelievers to slander him. He doesn't want people to say the Lord was not able to bring these people into the land which he promised them.

And so the Lord says, verse 9, chapter 5, Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. The old generation is dead. The past is left behind.

God has kept his promise. They're standing in the land. This is about God's faithfulness, God's ability. It's about his glory. God has done what he promised and he was able to do it despite their sin.

He is just amazing. And there is nothing in this story that allows the Israelites to claim one tiny little bit of pride or to boast about their achievements or their abilities.

They're in the land because of the grace and the mercy and the power and the promise of God. He has done it all. So when future generations tell the kids how they came to be into this land, the answer will be that God rolled away the reproach of Egypt.

[6 : 54] He kept his promises. He did it. It's incredibly similar to what we know as Christians in Christ.

When God speaks to his people in the New Testament, Ephesians 2, verses 4 and 5, because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

It's by grace you have been saved. His love, his mercy, his grace brings us from death to life. It is God who saves us.

It is all of him and none of us. We steal God's glory when we add anything to that equation.

If we quietly sit back and think things like, well, I'll be okay with God because I haven't really been too bad or I'm certainly not as bad as them, we steal the glory of God and we behave as though there is something about us that merits his love and favour.

- [8 : 11] I did that kind thing for that person yesterday and all that sort of stuff. God keeps his promises. God saves his people. It is God who is entirely faithful.
- It is God that we put our trust in. And you see in this story that total dependency on God is expressed in a number of different ways.
- So verse 2. The Lord said to Joshua, make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again. Adult men being circumcised.
- We're not talking eight-day-old babies. We're talking adult men. And there's probably not a lot of sympathy when you read this story if you're a woman because a woman who's been through childbirth knows plenty about pain.
- And all these men have the foreskins of their penises cut off as a sign of dedication to God. And it hurt. And it says in verse 8, after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed.
- [9 : 26] They were sore. And you know what men are like. We get a little bit sick. And it's like we're dying. We need to heal before we can function again.
- And we need all this TLC and tender eyes. Is that right? There's some smiles. But circumcision for an Israelite man was the covenant sign.
- It was the cut in the flesh which says, I belong to God. It's a step of significant commitment, especially as an adult man.
- Like getting a tattoo of your girlfriend or your boyfriend's name. You know, that's a real step of commitment, isn't it? Because it's for keeps, isn't it? Because if it's not for keeps and if you make a mistake, you've got a problem.
- It's going to need to be done again or revised or get a boyfriend or the girlfriend with the same name somewhere down the track. But here it is.
- [10 : 40] This cut in the flesh, it's an irreversible decision. There's no turning back. You can't put these things back on. It's an outward sign of an inner yielding or commitment or at least it's supposed to be.
- And the really strange thing is, if you read verses 5 to 7, it says all the people that came out had been circumcised. That's 40 years before. But all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not.
- And the Israelites had moved about in the desert 40 years until all the men who were of 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 that he had solemnly promised their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey.
- So he raised up their sons in their place and these were the ones that Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they hadn't been circumcised on the way, on the journey.
- So get this. The earlier generation had the outward sign of commitment, the covenant sign of belonging to God, the religious symbol.
- [11 : 51] They looked really good on the outside. They measured up. But they weren't right on the inside. They didn't listen to the voice of the Lord. They didn't live by faith and they died.
- And in another place, Moses calls them a stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts. And this new generation, well, they don't look right on the outside.
- They haven't been circumcised yet. They haven't got the sign of belonging to God, but God reaffirms and fulfils his promises to them. And Romans chapter 2 and 3 talk about this idea of circumcision of the heart.

It's what's inside that matters and they're beginning in a good place. They've got circumcised hearts. And you get this sort of picture, if you look at the contrast between the two groups of people, that having religious symbols doesn't make you safe.

So having a great track record of church attendance or being baptised in the right way or participating in the Lord's Supper or hanging a cross around your neck or a fish on the back of your car or going to Bible college or reading your Bible and praying, none of those things actually means anything if we do not listen to the voice of God and live by faith.

[13 : 11] So they've got this whole generation of Israelites who had the religious symbols and they died. God said, trust me, and they didn't. Now, we had a baptism this morning.

I think we've got some adult baptisms next week, which is just awesome. And we know that when somebody goes into the water, that going into the water doesn't make you safe with Christ, but it's an expression of commitment, isn't it?

It's an expression that God has brought me alive in faith and I want to acknowledge this new faith that I've been brought to outwardly in the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to do the outward thing to signify what's been going on inwardly in me.

It's a great thing to be able to do. We know that you can actually go through a ceremony without it having any impact on your heart.

And the Lord Jesus Christ wants both. He wants our hearts, but he also gives us a ceremony like baptism, which is this outward way of saying, this is what's been going on in my heart with Christ.

[14 : 21] An outward way of identifying with him. But he wants deep inner change and dependence upon him. So a great thing to do combined with faith.

Dependence on God is seen in other ways in this passage. So verses 11 and 12. The day after Passover, that very day they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened bread, roasted grain.

And the manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land and there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate of the produce of Canaan. So they've had their first meal in the land.

They've eaten the produce of the land and all of a sudden the handouts that they've enjoyed for the last 40 years in the desert just stopped. This 40-year miracle comes to an end where they got up every morning and breakfast was served and Saturdays they had off they didn't even have to gather for.

But it was now finished. God had led them, he provided for them, he'd done this wonderful miracle and it just stopped. And now they've got to find it for themselves. But it symbolises that God has brought them into the land, he's kept his promises, and now he begins to provide for them in the way that he had always promised and the miracle is no longer required.

[15 : 52] And then at the end there's this really strange encounter in verses 13 and 15. Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up, he saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand and Joshua went up to him and said, are you for us or for our enemies?

Neither. But as commander of the army of the Lord I've now come. And Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence and asked him, what message does my Lord have for his servant?

And the commander of the Lord's army replied, take off your sandals for the place that you are standing is holy. And Joshua did so. So he's a mighty man, his sword's drawn, it begs the question, what are you going to do with it?

Are you for us or are you for our enemies? Neither. I come as the commander of the armies of the Lord, get your shoes off, you're on holy ground.

It's an encounter with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords in the Old Testament. And what's coming out of this is that God is impartial. He's not my mate.

[17 : 02] We don't have him in our pocket. He won't drop a special word on our behalf. When we stand in his presence, we do so on his terms. And the question is not, is he for us?

Is God for us? But are we for him? And John F. Kennedy's famous challenge to the people of America was, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.

What does the Lord require of us? He certainly wants the Israelites to trust him and depend on him, knowing him for who he is. So this whole passage, this is about God's glory.

It's about God's purposes. The Israelites know the joy and the awesome privilege of standing in the Lord's presence and being used for his glory. If we think we're doing God a favour when we pop up at church or we do some good thing or a friend of mine's mum who said one year that she was going to church at Easter to pay her respects to God and I just went, oh, think again.

He is awesome in might and power. He is glorious in his majesty and his kingdom is over everything and it is forever. And God demands our attention.

[18 : 26] He dictates the terms of our relationship with him. And wonderfully, he has shown the most extraordinary love in the death of his son.

He has acted mightily to save us from his most deserved judgment. Friends, our God is not our puppet or plaything.

Or gadget or toy. He's holy. And as believers, God will sometimes do extraordinary things through us and for us.

I can think of no greater joy that I have ever known than being there when he brings about the miracle of new birth. When the scales fall away from somebody's eyes for the first time and they respond to God with faith and dependence.

I could cry right now and I recall that happening for one of my family members. When they put their faith and their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, tears of absolute joy and delight and relief at the goodness and the power of God in Christ as we yield ourselves to him.

[19 : 31] So the Christian life is not about technique or ritual. Life as a believer is about dependence on Christ, a life of reliance on him, a life of trust in him, a life which is lived for him.

The people of God in Joshua are on the verge of experiencing considerable power and great success. They're about to see the walls of Jericho fall without them lifting a finger and they prepare themselves by submitting to their God and Father who will lead them into that success.

We are dependent on God for every breath we take. He is holy and our only proper response is to give him glory in everything.

Our confidence is in him and not in ourselves. Amen.