
FRESH MEANING TO OLD COMMANDS

STUDY NOTES FOR CARE GROUPS – JOSHUA 5:1-15

June 7, 2009

The central focus for our study is how can we prepare ourselves for the challenge that God place in our paths?

Context

The leaders of the city-states of Canaan are terrified of Israel (v.1), so the time seems right for Israel to begin military operations. But Israel is not yet ready. More spiritual preparation needs to take place.

1) Study Part A: Joshua 5:1-12

Commitment from the People

Why Circumcision?

Yahweh's command to Joshua to circumcise the Israelites (v. 2) catches us by surprise. On the eve of a military campaign, it seems like a poor strategy. Circumcision, the removal of the foreskin from a male's reproductive organ, was normally performed when a baby boy was eight days old. The procedure would cause considerable pain for an adult male and would require recovery time (see v. 8) – not the most strategic situation for a nation that has just entered enemy territory!

However, Yahweh had established circumcision as the sign of the covenant He had made with the Israelites, the offspring of Abraham (see Genesis 17:9-14). Furthermore, Yahweh certainly used the Canaanites' fear (v. 1) to keep them from attacking Israel at such a vulnerable time.

Still, we wonder, as modern readers, why God would choose such a radical procedure for a "sign" of the covenant. Why not pierce an ear, use a tattoo, or even cut off an earlobe, etc.? Yahweh probably chose a surgical procedure on the most intimate part of a man's body because it reflects the intimate bond that Yahweh has with His people. Also, the surgical removal of the foreskin symbolized that Yahweh's people were to do to their hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16).

The Answer: A second Time

Verse 3 reports that Joshua obeyed Yahweh's command and circumcised the Israelites at *Gibeath-haaraloth* – a Hebrew expression means "Hill of the Foreskins." Then, in verses 4-7, the narrator explains the reason for this event. The reference to circumcising the Israelites a

'second time' (v. 2) reflects the need for a new generation of Israelites to undergo circumcision. The previous generation, which had personally experienced deliverance from Egypt, had been circumcised, but they had not circumcised their offspring – the current generation – during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

Verse 9 tells us that this act is a rolling away of the 'disgrace of Egypt.' This expression refers either to the disobedience of the previous generation that came out of Egypt or to the scorn that the Egyptians showed the Israelites by claiming that their forty years of wandering around in the desert would end in death (see Deuteronomy 9:27-28).

Assurance from God: 'No more Manna.'

Another significant event took place while the Israelites were camped at Gilgal: they celebrated Passover (v. 10; see Exodus 12; Leviticus 23:4-5). On the day after Passover, the day when the feast of Unleavened Bread was to begin (Leviticus 23:6-8), the Israelites ate the produce of the land (v. 11). On the same day, the 'manna' (Hebrew for 'what is it?') that Yahweh had been providing for years stopped coming. Now Yahweh provided the crops of Canaan for their food.

Discussion:

'Being' comes before 'Doing.' That is, when God places an opportunity or challenge before His people, He expects them to prepare themselves spiritually. God expects His people to deal first with their guilt and shame resulting from their disobedience. Spiritual preparation precedes the execution of any assignment that God has given to us.

Questions:

- a. What are some areas whereby we need to deal with in our own lives just as the Israelites did at Gilgal?

- b. How has God given you some sign or form of assurance as He asks you to carry out His work? Share some examples to encourage your Group members.

- c. What about circumcision today? Is the act of physical surgery valid today?

- d. Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

- e. Colossians 2:11, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ."

Application:

Has God been speaking to you about a new assignment / challenge, perhaps at home, at work or at school? What kind of actions have you been challenged to make, based on your faith?

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, for rolling away the guilt and shame of my sin. Thank you for the circumcision you performed through Christ on my heart. Help me to pursue purity before I pursue service for You.

2) Study Part B: Joshua 5:13-15

Affirmation from God: A Surprise Encounter with the Commander of the LORD's Army

Verse 13 ('look, behold!') highlights the surprising sight that greeted Joshua. The NRSV leaves the term untranslated, but a more literal translation would read like this: *'He looked up and saw, and behold, a man was standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand.'* The expression 'with a drawn sword in his hand' is the very same expression used of the angel of Yahweh when he stood before Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:23), and the other occurrence of this expression comes in 1 Chronicles 21:16, where an angel is again the subject.

Interestingly, the man with the drawn sword deflects Joshua's question – *'Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?'* – and addresses another issue. The NRSV's 'Neither' in verse 14 is a bit misleading, because the Hebrew term is simply "No."

In other words, the man is not claiming he is neither on Israel's side nor on the side of Israel's adversaries. Rather, he is saying, 'No, that is not the issue here.' The issue is that this person has come as the commander of the army of Yahweh.

Question: What is meant by 'the army of Yahweh?' Does this refer to the Israelite army or to a heavenly army?

Answer: The expression 'Yahweh of hosts' or 'Yahweh the God of hosts' occurs more than 270 times in the Old Testament, and refers to heavenly forces. So the reference is to a heavenly army. Furthermore, the man's identification of himself as 'commander of Yahweh's army' hints that he is actually an angel or a divine being.

The Response from Man to God: Bow down and Worship

Joshua's response confirms our understanding that this man is actually a divine being. Upon learning the identity of the man, Joshua fell to the ground and worshipped – that is, prostrated himself (v. 14).

Three details in Joshua's action revealed his recognition and acknowledgement in worship:

- Joshua seeks a command or message
- Joshua calls himself 'your servant'
- Joshua refers to the commander as 'My lord.'

The scene closes with the commander of Yahweh's army instructing Joshua to remove his sandals because 'the place where you stand is holy' (v. 15).

Question: What is 'holy?'

Answer: The term 'holy' means to 'set apart.' The place is holy because Yahweh is present. The commander's instructions to Joshua resemble Yahweh's instructions to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:5). Like Moses, Joshua must come to grips with Yahweh's holiness before setting out on the mission. With the privilege of Yahweh's presence comes the responsibility to respect Yahweh's holiness

Discussion:

We are reminded that worship comes before service. To put it another way, people must respond to God's holiness before they carry out the mission that God has given them. Because God is holy, He expects His people to pursue holiness in their lives (Leviticus 11:45; 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

Application:

In what areas of your life do you need to pursue holiness before God so that you can serve Him effectively?

In what ways can we encourage our Group towards putting God first in our endeavors and not focusing on the end results or outcome of the work?

Prayer:

Thank you Lord for reminding me of your holiness. Help me to realize that my greatest need is my personal holiness so that I can serve you.