



Scott Turansky, Senior Pastor
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WITH GOD, NEW BEGINNINGS ARE POSSIBLE

Joshua: Obtaining Victory in the Christian Life
Joshua 5

Let me bring you up to speed as to where we are. The Israelites have made it across the Jordan River and now they're in the Promised Land. They're waiting in order to move forward.

If I were the general, I'd say, "Strike quickly now that you're in the land." We've got a million people in the land. The armies are ready to go and they're ready to take over. However, God has a whole different plan because Joshua 6 is the story about conquering Jericho. They don't even get there in Joshua 5. Why? Because they're going to do four things in Joshua 5 before they can get into Joshua 6. I think the four things they do are very significant for us in our spiritual lives.

I think we need to understand that in our own lives. What are we going to do, how are we going to handle life in life situations? Because I think we're eager oftentimes to do and get the job done. But God is more interested in who we are, getting us ready, and maximizing what He wants to do inside of us. So think in terms of doing versus being and I think you'll have an understanding of where we're headed today.

Look at Joshua 5:1. It says this: *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 we had crossed over, their hearts melted and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.*

There were a number of groups of people within the land. The Amorites were nomadic people who wandered around. The Canaanites had fortified cities along the coast area. It says they heard about what happened. They heard about how the Israelites had come across the land. The word had gotten out that God had done some miraculous things, that He opened up the Jordan River.

Here's what I think is going on. The Israelite people were very aware of God's miracles, were very aware of what was going on in their lives. Now God had moved them into the Promised Land. I don't think they were aware of what was going on in the other people around. And so this verse just reveals to us that God is doing some work in other people as well, which, I believe, reminds me and reminds us that God is working in all kinds of people's lives, not just our lives.

We see God working in our lives, we see what He's doing, we know He's working in our lives. But all around us are other people who are watching God work in our lives. They're eager to see how does a Christian handle criticism? How does a Christian handle discouragement? How does a Christian handle the loss of a job? How does a Christian handle life situations? They're looking

at that. They want to see what we're like, what we're doing. People are watching and they're watching because they're interested to see how we're going to respond. And it's often in those situations that we're able to share who God is in very personal ways in our lives.

Philippians 1:27-30 says, *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. No matter what happens. Not just when the good things happen, but when bad things happen too conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*

Many of you are involved in our 90-Day Adventure. We have two other churches that have asked for all the material that we're doing here in the 90-Day Adventure. They want to also do this because they're finding it to be rather interesting to have young people asking parents questions and parents trying to challenge their children and everyone sharing the faith. So if you aren't a part of the 90-Day Adventure, today you need to write your email address on a piece of paper and just give it to me or tell somebody and we'll sign you up for this so you can see the emails that are coming out for those three groups of people. You can be a part of that with us.

The emails that are coming out from Erik seem to be so strategic. He's talking about how to pass the faith on to anyone. How to be ready to do that. And I've seen some of the ones that are coming up. They are great tips on how to just share Jesus, how to be a light in the world. Other people are watching.

I think the Israelites didn't know the other nations out there were watching, but they were. And notice the response of other nations in verse 1 of chapter 5. They were terrified. Their hearts left them.

I do not know how non-believers deal with tragedy. It's an amazing thing to me. I watch the advice that's given on all kinds of sites to help people deal with tragedy in their lives. It's stunning to me how you give advice to parents on how to work with their children or other things if you don't know God. The fact that we know God is strategic. There are so many more resources. We have spiritual resources to understand God and His grace and the battle with evil and God's righteousness. It's just amazing. People are watching us as Christians; our responses to life situations are so important.

Now I would be inclined to immediately attack Jericho and get on with the business and do what we need to do. But God's ways are different than my ways so we see in Isaiah 58:9. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

God has a plan and He's going to take the people into four things that they're going to do in this chapter: circumcision, the start of the celebration of the Passover, the ending of the manna that they were having come their way every morning, and then Joshua is going to be charged by the Angel of the Lord in that particular moment. I want you to see those four things as we go through.

Joshua 5:2 says this: *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 Haaraloth.* That would make the fighting men incapacitated for a few days, for three or four days, as they're healing up. They're not going to be doing any fighting in this period of time.

It's fascinating to me how God is more interested in who they are, in their identity. You see, circumcision was a statement of their identity as men of God. And that statement was far more important than conquering any city or any walled area. He wanted them to know who they were. So during this time, they're going to circumcise all the men who had grown up in the wilderness, who are now fighting age. They were going to be circumcised. As they're being circumcised and during this whole period of time they must be thinking back on Genesis 17, which is the original story of how circumcision came into the whole Israelite community.

I'm going to read that whole passage to you right now. As you read Genesis 17 God is giving a promise way back there to Abraham, way back in the beginning, telling Abraham, "I'm going to give you a great nation. I'm going to give you a land to possess." We are seeing that happen. Over a million people now coming across the Jordan and we have the Promised Land there for them.

As I am reading this story from Genesis 17, you're going to look at it both from Abraham's perspective, understanding that circumcision and the purpose of that, but you're also going to see it from the perspective of Joshua and all of the people as they are reaping the benefits of the promise that God gave. Look at this passage in Genesis 17.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to

undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Circumcision usually took place on the eighth day because the body at that point didn't have enough vitamin K in order to coagulate the blood. So they'd wait until day number eight. In our current culture many young boys are circumcised immediately while in the hospital, but they give them an injection of vitamin K so that the blood can coagulate. Interesting thing about circumcision.

I didn't really understand a lot of this until I went to Kenya. In Kenya the young men are circumcised around twelve or thirteen years old when they become a man and I'm thinking I like our practice better when it's much younger. I even said that in my class as I was teaching prospective pastors who were mostly twenty to thirty years of age.

I said to them, "In America we circumcise our boys at birth and I think that's a better idea." Boy, did I get the reaction from them! They said, "No way! They don't feel anything. It couldn't mean anything to them!" I said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Let me explain what happens to you in circumcision." For them, it's a rite of passage. It doesn't mean the same thing as the biblical circumcision, but for them it's a rite of passage. Sometime around twelve to thirteen years old, as they're moving into manhood, there's a celebration or ceremony of circumcision. I said, "That seems very painful to me." What they do is they go and get into the cold river. So they get themselves all cold for a little bit and then they come out of the river and at that point the procedure is done to them and they're proud of that. They said, "That's not circumcision when they're little babies. They wouldn't feel anything."

I was really impressed by the significance of circumcision in that culture. Now you have to understand that's not a biblical culture, that's not even the biblical use of circumcision, but what is true is that they were proud of it. It meant something very important to them. It means nothing to us today, really. But to them it meant something in Kenya.

To these people it meant something very important because it was a mark of identity. It was a statement that "I am a man of God. I am identified with God and His promises and who He is." You see, God is very interested in circumcising them because there's a spiritual battle that must take place before the regular battle that's going to happen.

That's always the case in our lives. Every day when we get up, we first fight the spiritual battle before we're able to deal with the rest of life. We have to deal with our own emotions, we have to deal with our own desires, we have to deal with the decision-making we're going to have today. All of that are spiritual things. If we start with the spiritual, we'll be much more effective in the material world that we live in. We need to be spiritually prepared. We need to remember who we are, that God has given us an identity. That's what he's talking about here.

Now let's continue on in verse 4 of Joshua 5. *Now this is why he did so.* In other words, this is why he told them to circumcise these guys. *All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the desert on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not. The Israelites had moved about in the desert forty 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 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 where they were in camp until they were healed.*

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day. Gilgal, galal, means rolling away.

I really like this picture because I think it's a statement of all of us and our identity in Christ. We must come to a place where we identify with Jesus Christ and say, "Yes, I want to serve Jesus Christ. I want to be identified with Him. I want to be a Christian." A Christian, a little Christ. "I want to emulate Christ in my life." When we make that decision to reapproach, the rolling away, the Gilgal, is put behind us. Anything that you've done, any problem that you've had, any experience, any past, any history, spiritual history, even your parents have disobeyed the Lord like in this passage; all of that is the reproach that's rolled away. God gives us a new identity and now we are the ones going forward to conquer the spiritual land that God has given us, the promises of being a part of His kingdom. That is a beautiful thing.

That's really the message that God is teaching these Israelites. It's more important to be than it is to do. It's more important to be the person of God, to have this identity before God and understand who He is.

Let me speak to you young people for just a moment. I want to say that you may go further in your spiritual lives than your parents did. It's likely that you will because your relationship with God now can take you farther than that. You see, that's what's going to happen in this whole passage. What's going to happen is these people whose parents who disobeyed the Lord, they didn't maximize what they could do and the promises that God had for them, the children now are going to take the next step. There's so much that you can do, young people, in your relationship with the Lord and experience God's grace in your heart in some significant ways. God wants to do new things in your life.

We're going to roll away the reproach (that's what the Gilgal experience is) and we're going to go forward. Every one of us has the ability to start anew, to start again crossing over the Jordan River to say, "I'm going forward; I'm not going back. I'm going to be a new person in Christ; I'm going to allow God to change who I am." That's the beauty of what's happening here.

Is circumcision relevant for us today? Well, the spiritual significance of it is certainly relevant to us. Remember I keep taking you back to Deuteronomy in Joshua. Deuteronomy is the

preparation that Moses gives to all the people for going into the land and then Joshua is the story of them going into the land. So let's talk about Deuteronomy here. Deuteronomy 30:6 says, *The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.* It's really the circumcision of the heart that's important. They were circumcised in their body, but it was a statement going on deeper inside of their lives.

There was a real challenge. The subject of circumcision was so important for the Israelite people that when Jesus came and people started becoming Christians, there was this major question in the church. This was the question: Should the people who are Gentiles who are becoming Christians now get circumcised like the Jewish people were? And the reason for that was because circumcision was so important. It was the mark of identity of God's people. So should we bring circumcision into the church? Is that what we should do? That was a major question in the early church. Theological dialogue and battles were fought over this very question.

Paul responds to this question in Romans 2:29. Should a man become circumcised when he becomes a Christian? The answer is *No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.* So the real issue for all of us has to do with the circumcision of the heart. It's the leaving of the fleshly life and being spirit led. It's allowing ourselves to be identified with Jesus Christ. That's what we're talking about as we come to understand God and who He is.

So the first thing they do as they're getting to come into the land is this circumcision. The second thing is going to be the celebration of the Passover. Go back to Joshua 5:10. *On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover.*

This is only the third time in their whole history that they celebrated Passover. The first time they celebrated was at the big event. The event when there was the ten plagues and the last one was that all the firstborn were going to die, but all the Israelites were told to take blood and put it on the doorposts and the lintels of the house and then the death angel **passed over** those homes. So they had a meal, a celebration of the fact that the death angel was going to pass over.

The next time they celebrated the Passover was while they were wandering in the wilderness on the one year anniversary of the Passover. They celebrated again then as a special remembrance of what God had done.

But then as they headed toward the Jordan River and they were getting ready to go across, they disobeyed God. They didn't have the ability to go into the land. They were not ready to obey the Lord. Because of that, they didn't celebrate the Passover the rest of their time. At all. For the next thirty-eight years they never celebrated the Passover.

Now they're celebrating the Passover for the third time. It is a remembrance time. The remembrance of God's goodness, of His protection. In the midst of all the strife that was going

on, God protected His people and took them through and led them out of Egypt and let them toward the Promised Land. God is directing them and leading them.

It's a celebration in the same way that when we celebrate communion, we're remembering that Jesus Christ died on the cross for us so that we could have eternal life, so that we could have the peace inside of our hearts. It's a remembrance time for us when we celebrate communion to enjoy God and to remember the beauty of what He's done for us. It's a treasure for us to remember.

Passover was like Thanksgiving. It was a great meal, a feast, a time of rejoicing. I think communion really ought to be a time of rejoicing. I know that sometimes during communion we take time to reflect and be somber. I think that's okay because we're reflecting on a serious thing that happened, when Jesus Christ was unjustly crucified on the cross; terrible thing that we think about. However, there's a victory in the midst of all of that that causes rejoicing. That's really the message of Passover, a celebration. I do believe that we should celebrate at communion time and enjoy the blessings of God and rejoice in the beauty of what has taken place.

So they celebrated Passover. That's verse 10. It's interesting to me that they're celebrating and having this feast right in the territory of the enemy. It reminds me of Psalm 23 where the writer says, *You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.* God does that for us. He gives us a peace even in the midst of the difficulties all around.

Verse 11 of Joshua 5: *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 of the produce of Canaan.*

Manna was a great food that they were able to enjoy and that manna came to them every morning. It was hand delivered to them. It was a miracle that God did. If they kept more than the day's supply, it would get worms in it and it would be worthless. So they learned. If they didn't learn the first day, they learned after the first day that you don't gather more than you need. You only take as much as you need and you don't try to hoard. But on Friday they could gather two days worth because then they wouldn't have to go out on the Sabbath. God miraculously protected the manna for two days so they wouldn't have to go on Sabbath and do the work to gather the manna.

Manna was a miracle. It was a demonstration of God's provision for them. It was a great thing that God did, but now it's going to end. Now they're going to have two things, unleavened bread and roasted grain. Those are the two things they're going to have.

When I was in Kenya we had unleavened bread and roasted grain. Continually you experience those things and they're delightful. These are great treats of living in the land. They're called different things in different cultures. Unleavened bread would be called *tortillas* in Mexico. In Kenya they're called *chipati*. And they are delicious. In Brazil they're called *empanata*. So all kinds of unleavened bread all over the place.

Roasted grain. I don't know if you've seen this. Last week on my vacation there was maize corn that they stick a stick in the end of it. It's leaning against charcoal fire and that charcoal fire is cooking it. They turn it around a little bit and it's roasted grain. It's delightful. It's like popcorn not popped. But it really tastes great! It's not our kind of corn. I don't think you could do it with our kind of corn. But the maize corn just tastes really good. It's a great snack. We used to pay a quarter on the way home from Nairobi to our place in Kijabe when we would stop and get roasted grain.

That's what they were celebrating here in Israel. They now had these two things, unleavened bread and roasted grain, that they could enjoy. The manna stopped, but God still provided.

It's interesting to me that God changes the way he works with the people. I think God will do that in your life and my life as well. Sometimes He does miraculous things. Great things are happening, He's providing us with the manna, and then it stops. We're going, "God, you've been providing this all the time. Now it's gone. What's the deal here?" And so we feel, "God, you've always done this this way, now why aren't you doing it? Don't you love me anymore? What's happening here?" Because we sometimes put God in a box and say, "God must act this way. He's always acted this way before. He must act this way again." And God says, "No, I'm going to change the way I work with you now. I'm going to allow you to experience another kind of food." God does that in our lives sometimes.

We think we've got God figured out? We've got a problem because God isn't someone we figure out. Great things happen in our lives as we get to know God and continue to allow Him to mold us and make us. There's a flexibility that takes place in all of that.

Well, those are three things that happen. So we had the circumcision, we had the Passover, and we had the stopping of the manna. That happened to all the people. There's one more thing that happens in this passage and that is that God has a special meeting with Joshua.

Start in verse 13. *Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"* You see, Joshua had thousands of fighting men at this time. We already read that in the previous chapter that just from the tribes of Manasseh and Gad, there were 40,000 fighting men. He had hundreds of thousands of fighting men all around and here he meets one and he doesn't recognize this guy. Is this guy a friend or foe? That's what he says to him, "Are you friend or foe?"

The man's response is interesting because it isn't really the man. It's a theophany, an angel; it's a demonstration of God. A theophany is the theological term that describes God manifesting Himself in some material form. You remember the burning bush that was God speaking? That's a theophany. When the three men were thrown into the fiery furnace, the Bible says a fourth man appeared there as a son of God. So that's a theophany, the appearance of God. God sometimes uses those things to help us understand or to demonstrate Himself in our world.

So He's doing that here. God is appearing as the commander of the army of Israel. So he says in verse 14, "Are you friend or foe?" *"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the*

Lord I have now come.” Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?” This guy tells Joshua, “I’m not going to take sides. I didn’t come to take sides, but I came to take charge. I want you to know who’s in charge here.”

This is very important for all of us who are leaders. Whether you’re a leader in a church or a leader in your business or you’re a leader in your home. Whether you’re male or female, it doesn’t make any difference. It’s a very important lesson here for leaders. This is the lesson: All leaders must learn how to follow. And that’s what Joshua’s learning here. Joshua had never conquered a city before. He didn’t have battering rams and siege engines and all those kinds of things. He had arrows and spears and rocks that they could throw. They had all kinds of things like that, but he’d never conquered this kind of a city before. Just like you and I as leaders, we haven’t been this way before. We have lots that we could learn.

All good leaders need to learn how to follow. If a leader doesn’t learn how to follow, he becomes a tyrant. We must all learn how to follow and that’s the message that Joshua’s going to learn in this passage. He is not ultimately in charge, God is in charge. God is saying, “You need to follow me, you need to know that I’m in charge.”

In response to the message of this leader, this commander , *Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?”* And the message is this: *The commander of the Lord’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.*

What does it mean that the place is holy? It can’t be holy because of the location because they’re standing in enemy territory. Maybe you say it’s holy because God is there. But God is everywhere. It’s not even holy because God is there. It’s holy because this is a moment in time when God is going to connect with a human person. Take off your sandals because you are standing on holy ground, because this is a place where God is going to connect with you in a very special way.

I think that is a very important thing for us to realize. I don’t know where God speaks to you. Maybe He speaks to you in common places. Maybe you open your Bible sitting on your chair, in your bedroom in the morning and that’s holy ground for you and God speaks to you there. Maybe God speaks to you as you listen to the radio and hear a speaker, a pastor preaching a sermon and God speaks to you in that moment in your car. You go, “Whoa. This is holy ground.” It’s that moment when God connects to us in that special way that we experience God’s grace and we are in that holy place, that special set apart place. I hope that you experience that in your life. God speaks to you and when He does you just need to recognize you are on holy ground.

Sometimes it’s the privilege that we have to share Jesus Christ with someone else. In that moment as we are telling that person about Jesus we know that by their response that they’re responding to God. We are on holy ground because we’re watching that connection take place. We go, “Whoa. This is a holy place.”

Sometimes a child will ask a parent a question, a serious question, a thoughtful question about the Lord, and you know that in that moment as you're sharing the answer with your child you are on holy ground. God is speaking in that moment and you just want to watch what happens. It's just an awestruck place and exciting place to be.

We all need those kinds of experiences in our lives to listen to God speak, to allow Him to talk to us, to convict us of sin, to remind us of our own inadequacies. To remind us that with humility we have a tremendous strength by following the leader, the commander of the army, God Himself.

I encourage you to read ahead in this next chapter where we're going to see Joshua conquer the city of Jericho. Great things will be learned in the midst of that chapter as we watch him lead the people and follow their leader, God Himself. But before we go into the land and conquer the land, we need to be focused on ourselves and see what God wants for us. So I'd encourage you. God wants to do something new. He wants to take you into the land, allow you to move forward. He removes the past from behind; we cross that Jordan River where we say, "God, I'm with you no matter what I've done in the past. Lord, I know you forgive me. You give me grace. You'll power me to move forward."

That's the beauty of the Christian life and that's the message of Joshua 5. We establish our identity. We remember the grace and the promises of God in the past. We watch how He works differently in our lives and we're willing to allow Him to change and do different than manna, and now provide us with the produce of the land. We're able to follow the leader, God Himself. Those are beautiful things. If we can learn those in the midst of Joshua 5 then we'll be ready for the Joshua 6 of our own personal lives.

Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we are honored to be your children and we thank you for what you've done to protect us and guide us and lead us in our lives. Thank you that you are a faithful God, that you have fulfilled your promises. We see those being fulfilled in this passage and we want those promises to be fulfilled in our own hearts. We know, Lord, that you ask us to dedicate ourselves fully to you, to circumcise our hearts. So this morning we want to lay aside everything else and come before you and dedicate our hearts to you and ask you to be the Lord of our lives. We want to follow you fully in everything that we do. In these moments now, Lord, as we sing, we dedicate our hearts to you. In Jesus' name, amen.