

“Roots, Reasons and Reality”

Joshua 5

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What are your prospects for the future?

Do you “look forward to” the next few months and years or do you fear what they may have in store for you?

Are you excited about the future or do you dread it?

What **does** the future look like for you?

Is it promising? Is it uncertain?

- Do you face unemployment?
- Do you anticipate needing to move?
- Is high school or college graduation nearing?
- Have you started a new business?
- Is a family situation coming to a head?
- Is this the last year that you will have children in your home?
- Are you facing retirement?
- Are you about to adopt or give birth to a child?
- Are you starting a new job?

I wish to describe two very different situations for you.

I want you to imagine yourself in one or the other of these two.

You are 27 years of age and you have just completed your Masters of Business Administration and have started working for a Fortune 500 company earning \$75,000 a year plus bonuses.

One year ago you got married to a wonderful woman who is now three months pregnant with your first child.

This week you closed on your first house anticipating that in one month you can move out of the cramped apartment that has been home to you for nearly three years.

Life is looking good.

Sometimes you wish you didn't have to sleep there is so much you want to do.

You can hardly wait to get up in the morning.

Your job is challenging and you are convinced that in less than two years you can earn a significant promotion and the perquisites that go with it.

Your attitude toward life right now is “just let me at it”!

The second picture is decidedly different.

You are 47 years of age and six months ago you were laid off from the telecommunications company you served for 12 years.

Eighteen months ago you purchased a home that was beyond your means and 9 months ago you had to borrow to purchase a car.

The financial pressure has created a strain at home and you are asking your teenaged kids to make sacrifices they've never known before.

You have searched for work both here and anywhere else in the country but it appears that your expertise is just not needed in this economy.

The self-doubt and even self-pity have combined to make you irritable and depressed.

This week, while you still have insurance, you went to the doctor because of some pain that won't go away and she wants to run some tests, as she said it, “Just to rule out the more serious possibilities.”

You find yourself sleeping more and more and some days you just don't want to even get up.

With those two examples I have described the extremes on a continuum from triumphalism to despair.

But where along that line do you see yourself?

As you anticipate the future, which mindset best reflects your private thoughts?

About your future, are you “gung-ho” or privately fearful?

Whether you have an aggressive, positive attitude of “just let me at it” or an almost defeated attitude regarding the next step in life, God has some great reminders for us in Joshua chapter 5.

From our earlier study of Joshua you might remember that the people of Israel, after 40 years of waiting and moving around the desert of the Sinai had finally miraculously crossed the Jordan River and were set to invade the Promised Land.

Imagine Joshua’s thoughts as they camped at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan River.

Yes they had seen a miracle but the Jordan didn’t have spears and arrows like the enemy would use against them.

The banks of the Jordan River weren’t fortified like the walls of Jericho and the other cities of Canaan.

Was Joshua excited or fearful or both?

To **prepare** the people for what lay ahead, to **encourage** their hearts and **anchor** their thinking, God had them stop the advance into the land and take time out for serious reflection and a reordering of their perspective.

Whether life is exciting or overwhelming, when faced with the mundane or even the largest challenges of life – that is the time to stop the advance, stop moving, and take time out for recalibrating our perspective.

Our tendency is **either** to feel like giving up **or** to think in terms of how we are going to make this happen, what we must do, or how we can manage the situation.

We tend to forget the most important dynamic of our lives – our personal relationship with the sovereign God of the universe.

Look what God has Joshua and the people of Israel do when they were faced with the huge challenge before them of invading the land:

READ Joshua 5.

“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.

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.

Now this is why he did so: 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.

On the evening of the fourteenth 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. 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.

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?" "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?" 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.

As Joshua anticipated the future, God stopped him and the people and had them experience **three things that put life with all of its possibilities and challenges in proper perspective again.**

And verse 1 tells us this was possible because God had put such fear in the hearts of the enemy that they didn't attack Israel when you would have expected it.

Instead the enemy cowered in their cities giving Israel the time to experience what would enable them to face the future.

And quite obviously I am suggesting that no matter what life looks like to you right now, these three experiences can help you put your life in proper perspective.

Our temptation is to see life unrealistically in either of two extremes; either ignoring the hard realities of life in a kind of Pollyannaish fantasy or succumbing to the hard realities of life in a pessimistic funk.

But there is too much **reality** in life to always be the naïve optimist and there is too much **life** in reality to always be the negative pessimist.

I think this text speaks to three things God wants us to remember as we anticipate tomorrow – whether tomorrow looks promising or threatening.

### **The first of them is in verses 2-9.**

God told Joshua to have the men of Israel circumcised.

The text tells us that none of the men who had been born during the 40 years that Israel wandered in the desert had been circumcised.

This was in direct violation of the command of God given centuries before: Genesis 17:11-14 "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... 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."

The text doesn't tell us why Moses and the Israelites disobeyed God for those 40 years regarding this important issue.

When I was in India a couple of weeks ago I asked Lal Pakhuongte, who administers our training program there, why he thought Israel didn't circumcise their children during their wandering in the desert.

Without "missing a beat" he responded, "Maybe because the same guy that was supposed to bring the map also forgot the knife." (pa- dum pa!)

We don't know why but they didn't.

But before they can engage in the "kingdom" work of possessing the Promised Land they need to be circumcised.

Why?

Centuries earlier, God chose Abraham and gave him a promise.

Abraham believed God and the Bible says that Abraham's faith was credited to him for righteousness.

In other words by faith, by believing God and his promises, Abraham was granted the righteousness of God so that he could now belong to God.

God said that as a sign of that new relationship, Abraham was to be circumcised.

If Abraham in fact believed God, as he said he did, then he would act out that faith by obedience in being circumcised.

In Romans 4 the Apostle Paul goes to great length to point out what should have been obvious by reading the account of Abraham in Genesis that Abraham was circumcised only after he believed.

The circumcision didn't "save" Abraham or any of his descendants.

It was faith alone in God's grace alone that brought people into a right relationship with God.

But the act of faith was circumcision, it was physical expression of faith.

And that act of faith signified that he belonged to God.

That **external** expression of faith signified an **internal** reality of faith.

That was clearly indicated in the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 30:6 “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.

Jeremiah 4:4 “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem...”

The Jew, Paul understood this when he wrote, Romans 2:28-29 “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 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.

By being circumcised the people were declaring their faith in God.

They were acting out their faith in obedience.

They were declaring their confidence in God’s choice of them as his people – they belonged to God.

What could be more important as they faced the days ahead than to know that God had chosen them and they belonged to him.

Now you might think, “What does that ancient ritual have to do with me?”

I’m glad you asked!

Listen to God through the Apostle Paul as Paul compares circumcision and baptism:

Colossians 2:9-12 “For in Christ ...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, having been **buried with him** in **baptism** and **raised with him through your faith** in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” (cf Galatians 3:26-29)

**Just as circumcision** was an outward expression of faith indicating an inward reality of faith in God's promises and provision, **so also baptism** is an outward expression of an inward reality – a faith in God's promises and provision – specifically his provision of Christ as our savior.

Going into the water of baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ in his death – we died to sin's penalty of death and the old way of life with him AND coming out of the water symbolizes our resurrection with him to new life.

**Just as circumcision** did not “save” Abraham or Joshua, but was the initial obedient response of faith, **so also baptism** does not “save” but is the initial obedient response of faith.

**Just as circumcision** marked them as belonging to God, **so also baptism** marks us as belonging to God.

**Just as circumcision** signified belonging not only to God but also to God's people, **so also baptism** signifies both our relationship to Christ and hence to one another – we are part of the people of God.

It is personal but it is not a private affair - we are incorporated into the body of Christ, the new people of God - the church.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free...”

By baptism we are indicating to whom we belong, who “owns” us.

In Genesis 17:13 God called circumcision “My covenant in your flesh”, meaning that the Israelite carried with him a constant reminder of God's choice of him and that he belonged to God.

As Christians, we don't have the same mark but we do have a physical experience, the very physical experience of baptism.

And as we remember our baptism, we remember its significance – it marks us as chosen by God, as belonging to God.



What could be more important to us as we face the days ahead than to know that God has chosen us – we belong to him.

Do you? Do you trust Him?

Have you experienced the outward physical mark of your relationship with God through Christ?

God wants you to be baptized both as an act of faith and that you may be reminded by it that He has chosen you – you belong to him!

The first thing God wanted to remind the Israelites and us of is God's choice of us – we belong to him.

Now the second thing God took the time to remind them of is found in 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."

There is only one other mention of Israel celebrating Passover during the 40 years after they left Egypt before now entering the Promised Land.

Is it possible that the same rebellion or neglect caused them to disobey this command of the Lord in the same way they did circumcision?

Many of you will remember this but Passover had been commanded 40 years earlier when God prepared to deliver his people from Egyptian slavery.

Exodus 12:1-14 "The LORD said... "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household...The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect...Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire... it is the LORD's Passover. On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn...The

blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will **pass over** you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt... This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD--a lasting ordinance.

And within hours God's angel swept over the land of Egypt and struck dead the firstborn humans and animals in every household that did not trust God as evidenced by a lack of blood placed on the doorframe.

The blood of the sacrificed lamb saved Israel from the plague.  
It was that plague that finally convinced the Egyptians to allow the Israelites to leave.

The generations that followed would always look back on that deliverance from Egypt as the quintessential deliverance to which any other deliverance was compared.

Passover is spoken of 73 times in the OT.

The Exodus event of Passover and deliverance was spoken of repeatedly as the great example of God's grace.

Again you ask, "What that ancient Jewish ritual to do with me?"

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Lord's Supper, Communion, is called a Passover meal.

In that Supper, when Jesus passed the bread to his disciples he said this was his body and that they should eat it.

He was clearly linking his death to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb and the eating of that lamb by the people in the Passover celebration.

Also, Jesus chose the time of his death. (John 10:17-18)

It is clear that he chose to die at the time that everyone's mind would be on the Passover celebration.

And the Apostle John puts the death of Jesus at the exact time of the slaying of the Passover lamb. (John 19:14 and implications thereon – see Morris The Atonement p102)

John also notes that no bones of Jesus were broken (quite surprising in that the legs of the others being crucified were broken – Jn 19:31-36).

It seems clear that this detail relates to the fact that the Passover sacrifice was not to have any bones broken (Exodus 12:46).

In 1 Corinthians 5:7 the Apostle Paul specifically relates Christ's death to the Passover sacrifice and celebration by writing, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."

Jesus' death gave what the Passover sacrifice, and other sacrifices, pointed toward but could not give – the forgiveness of sins and the deliverance from sin and death. (Cf. Romans 3:25 "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.")

In Hebrews 10:11-12 God tells us, "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest (Jesus) had offered **for all time one sacrifice** for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

Leon Morris has written: "The original Passover delivered the Israelites from destruction and introduced them into a new life in which the things Egyptian had no place. They were no longer slaves to the oppressor. They were free. So (it is) with the Christians. The death of Christ was the decisive intervention which delivered them from destruction and from sin and introduced them to a new way of life." Morris in *The Atonement* p103)

**Just as Passover** reminded the people of and celebrated the grace of God in delivering his people from captivity **so also Communion** reminds us of and celebrates the grace of God in delivering us from captivity to sin and death.

I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Roman Christians who faced huge obstacles in life, Romans 8:31-32 "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

We are delivered from the past and we have a future in God's keeping by his grace.

Circumcision/Baptism speak of God's choice of you.  
 Passover/Communion speak of God's grace toward you.

Now lastly look at Joshua 5:13-15

Apparently after Passover, Joshua was near the city of Jericho probably surveying the city to consider the attack that was imminent.

Was Joshua alone? Was it under cover of darkness?  
 Was Joshua needing encouragement before  
 attacking this impregnable citadel?

Surprised by someone standing in front of him with a sword drawn, Joshua asks, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" – are you friend or foe?

"Neither" the man answers.

That response would be understood by Joshua in another moment.

The man identifies himself as the "commander of the army of the LORD."

I don't have time to give the evidence today but this title "Commander of the army of the LORD" or "Commander of the LORD's army" as he is called in verse 15 is probably the LORD himself or at least the LORD's angel (Ex 3:2-4; 17; Judges 6:11-23; et al.) standing with his angels – the armies of heaven spoken of elsewhere. (Genesis 32:1-2; 2 Kings 6:17)

Here was the Lord himself standing before Joshua of the eve of his first battle, reminding Joshua by his presence that he was the one who had said in Joshua 1:5 "No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."

The drawn sword indicating that he was fighting for Joshua and Israel.

But the LORD also made it clear who was in charge.

Do you remember his response to Joshua's question of whether he was friend or foe? The Lord said "Neither,

“Joshua, I’m on **my** side. “

The real question is “Whose side are you on Joshua?”

You have been called to my purposes and I will be with you.

And to make certain Joshua got the message, The Lord told him to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground – “And Joshua did so.”

Not only did Joshua experience God’s **choice** marked by circumcision and God’s **grace** remembered in Passover, but also now he experienced God’s **presence** through the angel of the Lord.

Chosen by God, loved by God, and attended by God – what more could he ask as he faced the next day?

And that is our privilege as well.

- God’s choice of us remembered in our baptism.
- God’s grace toward us remembered perpetually in Communion.
- God’s presence with us promised in His Spirit.

Do you know those things to be true?

Do you have that perspective?

Will you remember it tomorrow whether life seems either incredibly good or impossibly bad?