



HOLY ENCOUNTERS

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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Joshua 5:1-15

Seventh Message

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At the beginning of a new year our thoughts turn to new beginnings. We like to make new resolutions and discard bad habits. Something about the cycles of life makes us want to wipe the slate clean and start over. The new year brings fresh hope. The anticipation of spring buds new energy. New things have the effect of lifting our spirits: the birth of a baby, a marriage entered into.

But shedding the past is not easy to do. Entering into a new year, a new beginning, and taking new territory can be anxiety-inducing. Our sense of adequacy is threatened. We are fearful about the uncertain future. Once we pass through that door, leaving behind old things and encountering new, life will never be the same again.

It is like that too when we become Christians. God calls us into a new life in Christ, a life of promise and fullness. We leave behind the old and by faith enter the new. In the Old Testament, this life is represented by the nation of Israel in their entering the land, that place flowing with milk and honey which God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The new year which we have just embarked upon marks our return this morning to our studies in the Old Testament book of Joshua. This is the story of Israel's entering into the land, defeating enemies and taking possession of their inheritance. We have already noted many parallels with the New Testament. Joshua is a type of Christ who leads God's people into salvation. Crossing through the waters of the Jordan pictures our baptism into Christ. Living in the land pictures our life in Christ, the Spirit-filled life. The enemies in the land represent the flesh that must be rooted out so that we might experience the fullness of Christ. The Joshua story then is our story, the story of our entering our new life in Christ.

We pick up our study today in chapter 5 of this great Old Testament book. The nation of Israel has recently come up out of slavery in the land of Egypt. Because of their unbelief, they have wandered in the wilderness for forty years, but now a new generation has grown up, one that will enter the land by faith. We have already looked at the account of Joshua as the newly chosen leader of Israel, replacing Moses. We have encountered the story of Rahab, the wonder of the crossing of the Red Sea, and the significance of the memorial stones placed there at Joshua's command. Now, in chapter 5, we find Israel on the west side of the Jordan, making final preparations to take on the enemies living in the

land they are about to inherit.

But it is not yet time for battle. Ahead lie some final preparations and holy encounters before the people will be ready. Joshua 5:1:

Now it came about when all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard how the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the sons of Israel until they had crossed, that their hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them any longer, because of the sons of Israel (Josh. 5:1, NASB).

This first verse (which connects to 4:24) highlights the emotional state of Israel's enemies. Two of them are mentioned, the Amorites and the Canaanites, a sampling of the seven nations listed in 3:10. We learn that they are living in dread and fear of God and his people.

We have already seen this theme in chapter 2. When the two spies came to Jericho, Rahab told them that as the people of that place heard what God had done with Israel, their hearts melted and there was no spirit left in them. That theme is reiterated here in chapter 5, after the nation has crossed over the Jordan into the land. The enemy is thoroughly demoralized. They have no resolve, no fight, no optimism, and no hope of winning; they are resigned to defeat.

As believers, we, too, face enemies when we enter into new territory. Our life in Christ is given to us as a free gift of grace, but tasting the fullness of this life involves our going to war. And the enemies we face, although spiritual, can appear as overwhelming as those that the Israelites faced: loneliness, discontent, lust, jealousy, pride, and other things. Difficult circumstances knock us off our feet and make us fearful. The threat they pose makes us want to depend on old ways of dealing with problems. We are tempted to go back to Egypt, to a familiar and comfortable place, even if that means a return to slavery.

One sinister enemy we face today is the fragmentation of marriage. We are succumbing at an alarming rate to the propaganda of the world that says that happiness is the highest goal in life. At times we allow anger and resentment to take hold of us. But these enemies can be defeated. God is not overwhelmed by them, and neither should we. It takes courage to enter the battle, however. It takes courage to really forgive when we have been wronged, to be honest, to die to ourselves, to get help for our addictions and dependencies and the things that lead to unhealthy relationships.

Life in Christ is lived by faith; and faith gives us the eyes to see that our enemies are already totally defeated. They know what God is capable of doing and that they are no match for him.

How can we gain hope and confidence and strength in our walk of faith? In this text we come now to three powerful and very holy moments in the life of Israel as they prepare for battle. First, there is covenant renewal, then a feast, and then a holy encounter. Verses 2-9:

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time." So Joshua made himself flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness along the way, after they came out of Egypt. For all the people who came out were circumcised, but all the people who were born in the wilderness along the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the sons of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, that is, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished because they did not listen to the voice of the LORD, to whom the LORD had sworn that He would not let them see the land which the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. And their children whom He raised up in their place, Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them along the way. Now it came about when they had finished circumcising all the nation, that they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

In the first scene, the Lord commands Joshua to circumcise the nation. This is the first thing that happens in the land. The reference to a "second time" could have one of two meanings. Perhaps the first circumcision took place in Egypt for those who were over forty, and now those who were under forty, who were born in the wilderness, take part in the second circumcision. Or perhaps the older portion of the militia may have had to be circumcised again, because Egyptian circumcision was incomplete. They practiced circumcision, but perhaps not in the same way as Israel (thus the emphasis on flint knives).

Verses 4-7 detail why circumcision was necessary. In the wilderness, the unbelieving people who came out of Egypt and were not allowed to enter into the land did not circumcise the next generation. Circumcision, the rite which God instituted with Abraham, was a symbol of faith, a sign of one's entering into a covenant relationship with God. It was a very personal symbol. This sign reminded male Israelites every day of their covenant relationship with God. J. A. Motyer comments: "circumcision...is the token of that work of grace whereby God

chooses out and marks men for His own." (In the New Testament, the sign of circumcision is replaced by baptism.)

The significance of this event is further amplified when God tells Joshua, "I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt." Thus the name given to the place is Gilgal, which means, "roll away." Egypt was a place of servitude and bondage, but that bondage had been completely removed; the shame of being attached to the world was cut off now that they were in the land.

The rite of circumcision, of course, would have left the nation completely defenseless for a time. The men were disabled for three days, and vulnerable to attack, because they were in clear view of the enemy at Jericho. We remember the story in Genesis 34 of Jacob's daughter, who was raped by the son of a Hivite prince. The young man wanted to marry the girl, and his father spoke with Jacob about intermarrying with his family. The sons of Jacob worked a plan of deceit and informed the Hivite king that all their males would first have to be circumcised. The king agreed to the proposal, but on the third day following the act, Levi and Simeon entered the village and killed all the defenseless males.

The act of circumcision is a very holy moment in the nation of Israel. After the crossing of the Red Sea, God puts them in a state of complete impotence and utter dependence on him. Not only are they vulnerable before God, they are vulnerable before one another. The hill of foreskins would have made a strange, ominous sight. As a community they experience weakness and dependence. Together they are marked out as God's people; and together their reproach is rolled away.

God does the same with us. When we enter into our life in Christ, he makes us totally dependent and vulnerable. In doing so he removes the stain and the shame of the past, our bondage to the world, our worship of false gods, and puts his mark on us. The enemies we will encounter are rendered powerless. They are scared to death, but they can wait. Dependence on God is the first order of business.

The second thing that happens at Gilgal is that once the men are circumcised, they eat the Passover meal. Verses 10-12:

While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal, they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho; and on the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.

The fact that circumcision was required before they ate the Passover meal is consistent with Exod. 12:44. Slaves who took part in the Passover feast had to be circumcised first—and Israel had been slaves in Egypt. Israel had crossed the Jordan on the eleventh of the

month, the day the lamb was selected. Three days later, the Passover was eaten. That was the day when the Lord passed over the nation of Israel and the angel of death killed all the first-born of Egypt.

On the fifteenth of the month, Israel celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then the first-fruits could be consumed, following the dedication by the priest. Coincidentally, the provision of manna, the supernatural nourishment of the wilderness, ceased on this day and Israel began to eat of the fruit of the land. According to Deut. 8:3, manna was provided for them so they would learn to live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God. That time had now come to an end; henceforth they would eat from the abundance of the land.

This is another very holy moment for the nation. This feast reminded them of their salvation. At last they could feed upon the produce of the land. Imagine eating manna for forty years in the wilderness! For many, that was the only food they had ever known, but now they would be sustained by the land itself.

The significance for believers today is obvious. In 1 Cor. 5:7, Paul says that Christ is our Passover. According to Exod. 12, the blood of the lamb provides for salvation, and its flesh, sanctification. And so it is with Christ. When we enter our new life in him, we are saved from death by his blood; and as we live in him we are sustained by feeding on his flesh. God's abundance is made available to us through Christ.

Circumcision and Passover point us to baptism and communion. These sacraments of the church, holy moments when we encounter God, are rich with significance. Dale Bruner writes: "The sacraments are God's hugs...God physically approaching and touching us" (quoted in Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* [Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995] p. 130). Donald McCullough comments: "Baptism and Eucharist...are mini-dramas of salvation using material props—water, bread, and wine...By washing a new believer and by eating and drinking together, Christians use their bodies to re-enact the story of God's gracious salvation in Christ. Through seeing, moving, touching, tasting, and smelling, God speaks again the creative and redeeming Word" (p. 130).

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation. It does not mark an arrival, but, rather, a beginning. And the Lord's supper is the sacrament of continuing nourishment. We gather around the table again and again to be nourished on our journey of faith. Again, Donald McCullough comments: "The Holy Spirit uses these expressions of faith to seal us with an assurance that we have been reconciled with God and adopted into the community of salvation. In this sense, these mini-dramas are a means of grace, a way in which the holy God transforms us into holy people" (p. 130-131).

The sacraments then are mini-dramas. These are the occasions when, like Israel, we act out our salvation.

The last thing that happens before the battle is that

Joshua has an encounter with the captain of the host of God's army. Verses 13-15:

Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No, rather I indeed come now as captain of the host of the LORD." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, "What has my lord to say to his servant?" And the captain of the LORD's host said to Joshua, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." And Joshua did so.

It is likely that this man is an angel of the Lord, but he carries the same weight as the One who sent him. Visits by an angel of the Lord were not uncommon to the patriarchs of the O.T. Circumcision and Passover were holy moments for the entire nation; now, this encounter was the final preparation for Joshua.

Joshua is walking near Jericho when he meets this foreboding figure. Observing that the man has his sword drawn, ready for combat, Joshua asks him two questions. First, he asks whose side he is on, saying, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" The man answers simply, no, he is on God's side. His army will advance God's kingdom; and if Israel breaks covenant (which they will), then he will be against them. Hearing these words, Joshua falls on his face to the ground.

Next, Joshua asks the man what he has to say to him. The angel replies, "Remove your sandals from your feet." This reminds us of the time Moses took off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground in the presence of God. In fact, this entire chapter has several uncanny parallels between Moses and Joshua: Both struck fear into their enemies (in Exod. 15:10-13); both initiated circumcision (Exod. 4:24-26 where Moses circumcised his son on the way to Egypt); both celebrated the Passover as part of the march to the land (Exod. 12); both took off their sandals before the Lord (Exod. 3).

What a very holy moment for Joshua! On the eve of the battle of Jericho, when he thinks he is in charge of the army of God's people, he discovers that he is not the captain after all. He finds himself humbled, dependent, bowing down on the ground. But he is encouraged, too. He knows that if he follows God, then God and his host will be with him.

Notice that the connections between this story and the Jesus story continue to be woven into the text. The story of Joshua, as well as the story of Moses, is the Jesus story. Jesus, too, struck fear into the hearts of his enemies. Before him the demons trembled; the Pharisees and Scribes feared; Pilate did not want anything to do with him. Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples in the Upper Room and explained the full meaning of the Passover in himself. When he began his ministry, he was not circumcised, rather he was baptized in the Jordan. And when he came to be baptized, John said it

was Jesus who should baptize him, for he was not worthy to untie his sandal. But Jesus did not take off his sandal. He was the Holy One of Israel, the captain of the host of the Lord.

What an amazing text this is. I must admit that I feel totally inadequate to express my feelings about it. The significance of these events overwhelms me.

Here we are witness to three very powerful and holy scenes: circumcision, Passover, and Joshua's encounter with the captain of the host of the Lord. All three events point to Jesus and to his salvation. Scarcely is the enemy mentioned but he is forgotten. Israel is not to think about the enemy, rather they are forced to think about their God. What this is pointing out is that the first priority in the land, in our life in Christ, is for the community of God's people to worship: to share the sacraments; to cut off the reproach of the world; to become defenseless and dependent; to take off our shoes, fall on our knees, and encounter God; to reckon that we are not in charge of the battle. Gilgal is the place of worship. What we need is not more weapons or more know-how; we need a holy encounter with the Living Lord. This is the encouragement we need to tear down the strongholds that assail us and experience fully the life that is ours in Christ.

Worship is the dominant theme in this book. When we think of Joshua we usually think of conquest and defeating enemies, but we are now in chapter 5 and Israel has still not gone to war. Every event we have discussed brings Israel to contemplate the greatness of their God, and leads to worship, not action. Every event connects to the salvation story of Jesus. The first priority is not war, but worship. Only when God occupies his proper place in our lives will we be prepared for the battle. The question is not what we will do for God or what we will do to take the land. The question is, do we love God? Is God at the center of our life? Are we giving him the worth he is due? That is true worship. Actually, this is what the word originally meant—ascribing proper worth. Worship, said Karl Barth, is “the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.” According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, our chief end is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

I have to confess that worship often eludes me. I am so anxious to rush headlong into the battle that I am not spiritually prepared; so anxious to learn that I engage my mind and not my heart; so anxious to accomplish spiritual tasks that I make myself the captain. We think that if we name the name of God, somehow God will be on our side. But the captain of the host of the Lord tells us that he is for God's kingdom—and we have to be careful to follow God. Spiritual warfare and spiritual life require spiritual preparation. Worship is not wasted time, it is the time of first-fruits, the time when we feed on God and the abundance of his grace, when we get re-

focused and re-centered.

Have you had a Gilgal experience? Have you encountered the holy God and become totally dependent and vulnerable? Have you cut off the reproach the world, the shame of the past, and opened up your heart completely to him? Have you been so overwhelmed by a holy and righteous God that you fell on your face on the ground? These are very holy times, times when we encounter a God who promises to never leave us or forsake us. What will it matter if we have accomplished wonderful things, spiritual or otherwise, but we have never encountered the holy God? Any one of us, wealthy or poor, small or great, well-known or hardly known, can have the richest life when we encounter God at Gilgal.

In some sense, every time we gather as the people of God we are coming to Gilgal. This is the place that is in between the crossing and the battle. We are in the land, but it is not fully ours yet. So when we come here on Sunday morning we come humbly and vulnerably in anticipation of putting God at the center of our life. Everything we involve ourselves in here, whether it is singing, praying, dedicating babies, celebrating the Lord's Table, or preaching, is meant to draw us to Gilgal, the place where we will taste and see God. Every one of us who stands up here before you wants to accomplish only one thing, and that is to quickly fade into the background so that you see only God and hear only from him.

Worship is a very subjective thing. It is striking that there is no reference to music in this chapter. What is it that will allow us to truly worship so that God is at the center of everything we do? It is the same for us as it was for Israel: we must begin with God. Daily we must remind ourselves of what God does in our behalf: He saves us, he feeds us, he talks to us, he loves us. Worship is our response to God's love in the face of Jesus.

Worship draws us into an ever-deepening awareness of the mystery of our relationship with God, connecting us to his awesome transcendence. Worship allows us to sense the divine otherness of God. If we become worshipping people we will be less fearful, more dependent on God, more pure in our heart, more successful in facing the spiritual forces of darkness, and more victorious in our battles. One writer put it this way: “Only in turning toward the Light can we do the dance, and only in this joyous but reverent dance before the Holy One will our deepest needs be met, for only then will we enter our full humanity as sons and daughters of God” (McCullough, p. 113). May we be like Joshua, ready to fall on our face on the ground, remove our shoes, and simply sit in the presence of God.

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