

Notes on Joshua 5

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IV. Circumcision of Males (5:1-12)

Verse 1

1. What effect did the miracle have on the people of the land?

Fear among the people of the land

When Israel had approached Canaan the first time forty years earlier, they had refused to enter because they feared the people of the land. But this time we are told that the people of the land feared Israel.

Rahab had told the spies that the people feared, because they had heard about the crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of the people east of the Jordan (cf. 2:10,11). Now, in addition, the kings and the people west of Jordan heard how God had enabled the people to miraculously cross the Jordan. This led them to fear even further. The account says their hearts melted and they had no spirit in them – i.e., no courage to resist.

This demonstrates a further purpose for miracles. They produce faith in God among those, like Israel and Rahab, who have hearts honest and willing to trust in God. But even those who resist God's will are affected. Their conviction that they are right is weakened. They may not be converted to follow the Lord and may not cease resisting truth, but they are at least weakened in their stand for error.

Verses 2-7

2. What was done to all the males when they had entered the land?

3. Use cross-references and explain the origin and significance of this act. Give **b/c/v**.

Command to circumcise the males

God told Joshua to make flint knives and use them to circumcise all the males among Israel. Joshua did so at a place then called the hill of foreskins.

The reason this was needed is that the younger generation had not been circumcised. Those who had left Egypt had been circumcised. But that generation had died on the way due to their disobedience in not entering Canaan at their first opportunity. They had refused to enter the land and so were consumed during the years of wandering.

The younger generation – the children who were born as Israel traveled in the wilderness after they left Egypt – had not been circumcised. They still needed this to be done, so it was done at this time.

Circumcision was the sign of being a descendant of Abraham and an heir of the promise to Abraham. See Gen. 17; Exodus 4:25; 12:43-48; Lev. 12:3. It was clearly required by God both before and after the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai.

So one wonders why it had not been done previously to this younger generation. V7 says they did not do it while traveling. Surely it would have been inconvenient. But it was done to males eight days old, so it seems it could have been done at that age without serious problem.

It may be that God simply did not insist on the practice in these difficult circumstances. However, the older generation clearly had rebelled against God and had been rejected by Him. Perhaps in their rebellion they simply did not keep other basic commands, including circumcision. Moses had been among them, and one would think that he would teach them the truth. Perhaps, however, God had not bothered to lead Moses to insist on this, since God had rejected that generation anyway.

Verses 8,9

4. What did the people do following the circumcision?
5. What was this place named? Why? (Think: Why might God have waited till this time to require circumcision?)

The people rest after the circumcision

Circumcision is a painful procedure at any age, but baby boys can heal rather quickly. And they cannot do anything for themselves in the meanwhile anyway, so no great loss is caused if the procedure is done at that age. However, when grown men are circumcised, they are incapacitated for work for several days, and they surely are not fit for war. So God had these men stay in camp for several days till they were healed.

One wonders why God waited till this time to have this done. They were near their enemies and were basically defenseless for several days (though the enemies would not likely know this). Had this been done east of Jordan it would have been safer. There their enemies were already defeated, and any enemies from west of Jordan would have had to cross the river to attack. God's reasons for waiting are not stated. Perhaps it was a test of faith to see if Israel would obey even when facing danger.

Then God said that He had rolled away from them the reproach of Egypt, so the place was named Gilgal (meaning "rolling"). Other passages refer to Gilgal. It is not clear whether they are the same or different locations. 4:19,20 had referred to it by this name, but apparently that account was written after the name had been given here at this event recorded in chap. 5.

What was the reproach of Egypt? I am not sure. Being uncircumcised was surely a reproach, especially for descendants of Abraham (cf. Gen. 34:14). And this reproach was removed when they were circumcised. They were about to eat the Passover, and the males had to be circumcised in order to eat it (Ex. 12:43-48).

But what had this to do with Egypt? Perhaps the point was that this generation was obedient to God unlike the previous generation had been. Perhaps God had viewed the previous generation with reproach as He had viewed the Egyptians. Or perhaps their failure to enter the land had brought the reproach of the people of Egypt on them (cf. Zeph. 2:8). In any case, this generation had kept God's word, so He had given them a renewal of the covenant of circumcision. This indicated they were truly His people, thereby removing the reproach that had been on their parents' generation.

Verses 10-12

6. What feast did Israel keep then? Give **b/c/v** about this feast.
7. Describe this feast and explain its purpose. (Note Ex. 12:43-38. What did circumcision have to do with the feast?)
8. What happened when Israel ate the food of the land? Explain what manna was and how it came. Give **b/c/v**.

The Passover kept

At Gilgal Israel also kept the Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the year. This is what God had commanded as recorded in Ex. 12:6. God had instituted the Passover as a memorial to the time He had slain the firstborn of the Egyptian sons but had "passed over" the firstborn of the Israelites, sparing them because they had put blood on their doors.

Israel was to keep this memorial every year. They had kept it sometimes (Num. 9:5), but it is not clear if they had kept it regularly as God commanded. Perhaps they had neglected this in their rebellion, even as they had neglected circumcision. Now they were returning to God's service, so they kept circumcision then the Passover. They had to be circumcised first in order to take the Passover properly (see above).

The food of the land and the end of the manna

Following the Passover was to be a feast of seven days in which bread had to be unleavened. After this celebration of the Passover, Israel ate bread unleavened along with parched grain and other foods. But what was special about this was that for the first time they had eaten the fruit of the land of Canaan. Until this they had been outside the land. Now they had entered and intended to obey God's command to take the land. They enjoyed eating the fruit of the land as God had promised them.

Since they had then come into the land, the manna ceased. The manna had provided their need for food throughout the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (cf. Exodus 16, especially v35). But now that they were in the promised land, they were able to eat the fruit of this land and did not need the manna. So it ceased.

Note that God never continues miracles after their purpose has been completed. But the purpose of all miracles was completed when the Scriptures were completed, so they ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8-11).

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Part 2: Israel Conquers Canaan (Joshua 5:13-chap. 12)

I. Conquest of Jericho — (Josh. 5:13-chap.6)

The Commander of the Army of the Lord – 5:13-15

Verses 13-15

9. What did Joshua see when he was near Jericho? Who did this person say he was?

10. What instruction did he give Joshua? (Think: What does this remind you of? What is the significance?)

The Commander's appearance

Joshua stood by Jericho, apparently across from it looking at the place where they must fight their first battle. Jericho was a major fortified city standing between them and taking the land.

As he so stood he saw what appeared to be a man standing opposite him having His sword drawn in His hand. Joshua approached him and asked if he was for the Israelite army or for their enemies. Perhaps he was asking which army the man was a member of, since the man answered "No" – i.e., he was not actually a member of either army. Instead He explained that He was the Commander of the army of the Lord who had come. Obviously He was on Joshua's side, but was a member of the Lord's army, not either of the human armies.

Joshua fell on his face and worshipped and asked what the Lord wanted to say to him. He viewed himself as a servant and correctly concluded that this One had appeared with a message for him. Joshua was about to enter into the first battle that he had actually directed as the highest leader of the people (though he had led many times subject to Moses). God had been guiding and instructing Joshua in many ways since he took command of the Israelites. So he was looking for God's further guidance, especially regarding taking Jericho.

The Commander of the Lord's army told him to take off his sandals, since he was standing on holy ground. Joshua obeyed. This, of course, is the same thing God had told Moses when He had appeared to him in the burning bush to call him to lead Israel from Egypt (Exodus 3:5). This event, so clearly similar to what happened with Moses, was another evidence that God was really using Joshua to lead the people. God wanted both Joshua and the people to know that Joshua was the appointed leader whom all should follow.

Two facts would indicate that this was not just a man but was actually God appearing in the form of a man: (1) the fact Joshua actually worshipped Him, and (2) the instruction to take off his sandals as Moses had been instructed when in the presence of God at the burning bush. It would seem that God here appeared in the form of a man, just as He had appeared in the bush to Moses. For other examples consider Gen. 18:1-33; 32:24-30; Ex. 3:2ff (see also Num. 22:31-35; Gen. 16:7-13; 21:17; 22:11-18; 24:7,40; 31:11; 48:15,16; Judges 6:11-24; 13:3-23; etc.

But what was the purpose of this visit of the Commander of the Lord's army? One purpose would surely be to confirm that Joshua was the leader God had chosen to lead Israel into battle, even as God's appearance to Moses confirmed that Moses was to lead God's people. This served the purpose of all miracles. Another purpose would be to give encouragement and strength to Joshua as he faced his first battle as leader of God's people. He would need assurance that God would be with Him (see on 1:5-9).

But another purpose of the meeting appears to me to be to give Joshua instructions about how to approach the upcoming battle. Joshua asked the Commander what He had to say to Joshua. He needed instruction and was evidently expecting to receive them. Chapter 5, however, records no such instructions. If we ignore the chapter division that men inserted, however, chap. 6 begins almost immediately giving the instructions of God for taking Jericho. It appears to me that the message from God in 6:2-5 is the message given by this Commander to Joshua. He appeared in 5:13-15, but what He told Joshua is actually recorded in chap. 6.

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