

# FAILS OF OUR FATHERS

JOSHUA 5:1-9    APRIL 3, 2022

The Battle of Iwo Jima was a monumental endeavor. Over 100,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines were part of the fight. Though ultimate victory was assumed, it wasn't going to be easy. The US forces would have no element of surprise<sup>1</sup> - the enemy knew they were coming. In fact, the Japanese garrison on the island was surprised that no attack came in the summer of 1944. Instead, the onslaught began in February of 1945. That gave the Japanese ample time to dig in and fortify their position, creating miles of underground tunnels, bunkers 75 feet deep,<sup>2</sup> and beach pillboxes whose walls were made of four foot thick, reinforced concrete.<sup>3</sup> Having that extra time to prepare led to one of the bloodiest battles in American history.

There were other troubles. Coming out of the water, Marines found that the beaches were *not* as they had been described by the battle planners. There were tall slopes of volcanic ash blocking their advance. And then there was also an issue of personal cargo. One historian writes:

*"Marines were trained to move rapidly forward; here they could only plod. The weight and amount of equipment was a terrific hindrance and various items were rapidly discarded. First to go was the gas mask...regarded as an unnecessary trapping."*<sup>4</sup>

The Book of Joshua gives us the history of the nation of Israel finally entering into their Promised Land and the battles fought there. Israel's fighting force was huge, but that doesn't mean the conquest would be easy. In chapter 5 we see God's people just after they have crossed the Jordan river. They've established a sort of beachhead camp and now all that is left to do is start the invasion. Except, the Lord holds them back and shows them that there is an obstacle they need to deal with. There's unnecessary weight hindering them that must be shed before they can proceed. It will mean a significant delay, they'll lose the element of surprise, but in this passage we learn that God cares much more about our closeness with Him than any conquest we're attempting. Our connection with Him is the most important consideration in any advance, any endeavor, any phase or arena we find ourselves in.

**Joshua 5:1 - When all the Amorite kings across the Jordan to the west and all the Canaanite kings near the sea heard how the Lord had dried up the water of the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, they lost heart and their courage failed because of the Israelites.**

Terror had gripped the hearts of the entire land from the mountains to the sea.<sup>5</sup> Joshua had sent spies to Jericho to bring back a report and they verified this fearfulness. Through Rehab the

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pacific-harry-george/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Iwo\\_Jima](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Iwo_Jima)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planning\\_for\\_the\\_Battle\\_of\\_Iwo\\_Jima](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planning_for_the_Battle_of_Iwo_Jima)

<sup>4</sup> Derrick Wright *Iwo Jima 1945: The Marines Raise the Flag On Mount Suribachi*

<sup>5</sup> Marten Woudstra *The Book Of Joshua*

Israelites learned that the people of Canaan were in a panic. They knew God had dried up the Red Sea to allow them to cross. They knew that Kings Sihon and Og had already been destroyed with their armies.<sup>6</sup> Their courage had failed. But, at least (they thought) they'd have the natural barrier of the Jordan river. It was the time of year when the Jordan flooded, overflowing its banks. But that was no more a barrier than the Red Sea had been. Imagine the fear the scouts of Jericho and the other cities of the land would've felt as they watched the hosts of Israel stepping into Canaan, unhindered and months sooner than expected.

These incredible feats caused Rahab to conclude, "Your God is God in heaven above and earth below." And she pled for mercy. She asked for her life and the lives of her family to be spared.

This opening verse is a good place to pause and address any person listening today who is not a Christian. The God of the Bible is real and He is God of heaven and earth. You may not worship Him, but that doesn't change the fact that He is true and that He is coming. When He comes, He comes with wrath in His hand to judge the earth. The fate of those who will not believe is just like those in Canaan. You face a battle you cannot win with an unstoppable God - One who is not hindered by rivers or oceans. Human power or fortifications cannot stop the Lord's coming. And He has promised, very clearly, that He is coming again to save His people and judge His enemies.

**Zephaniah 1:18 - <sup>18</sup> Their silver and their gold will be unable to rescue them on the day of the Lord's wrath. The whole earth will be consumed by the fire of his jealousy, for he will make a complete, yes, a horrifying end of all the inhabitants of the earth.**

**Romans 2:5-8 - <sup>5</sup> Because of your hardened and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed. <sup>6</sup> He will repay each one according to his works: <sup>7</sup> eternal life to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality; <sup>8</sup> but wrath and anger to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth while obeying unrighteousness.**

If you aren't a Christian, we would plead with you today to be like Rahab. Maybe you know the story. She and her family were the *only* people in all Jericho who raised a white flag. She talked with the spies from Israel and said, "We see what's coming. We believe your God is true. Please save us." And God did. Anyone else in the city could've made that choice, but they wouldn't, and so they perished. Don't make the same mistake. Today, if you hear His voice, don't harden your heart.

**Joshua 5:2 - <sup>2</sup> At that time the Lord said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelite men again."**

Back at the camp there is a delay. Human strategists would've said, "We *can't* wait. We need to take advantage of this momentum we have." They had reliable intelligence that enemy morale was completely destroyed. Now was *not* the time to hesitate, but to rush forward to victory.

---

<sup>6</sup> Joshua 2:9-11

But God doesn't care about any of that. He tells Joshua, "We're going to be here awhile, because there is a nationwide issue we need to deal with." All the men needed to be circumcised.

The text says "again," but that doesn't mean *these* fellows had been circumcised before. In fact, it's explained for us in verses 4 and 5.

**Joshua 5:4-5 - <sup>4</sup>This is the reason Joshua circumcised them: All the people who came out of Egypt who were males—all the men of war—had died in the wilderness along the way after they had come out of Egypt. <sup>5</sup>Though all the people who came out were circumcised, none of the people born in the wilderness along the way were circumcised after they had come out of Egypt.**

The big question is: Why was this whole generation of men uncircumcised? Some think that, after their fathers had *refused* to enter the promised land 40 years earlier, God had forbidden it as a symbol that they were breakers of the covenant.<sup>7</sup> Some suggest that since they had to follow the pillar of cloud around and they never knew when it was going to move, it was impractical to carry out the procedure there in the wilderness.<sup>8</sup> Others point to the spiritual indifference of their parents' generation,<sup>9</sup> which was demonstrated so many times in Exodus. We're not explicitly told the reason, though *disobedience* is highlighted in verses 6.

But here is the important thing: After decades of wandering, after crossing the Jordan, after finally stepping foot into that land that had been the focus of God's promise to Abraham's descendants for hundreds and hundreds of years, God says, "Wait: We have a *spiritual* issue we need to address. There's a gap in your faith that needs to be made right and *nothing* is more important."

Using flint knives wasn't something that God had required of Abraham back when circumcision was first instituted for the Hebrews. It draws our thoughts back to that moment when Moses had set off toward Egypt to be the deliverer, yet *he* had failed to circumcise his own son. That failure led to a strong reaction from God - God was going to *kill* Moses, until his wife, Zipporah, took a flint knife and circumcised their boy on the spot. In both cases, the urgency and the opportunity and the significance of what God wanted to do was all *secondary* to faithful obedience.

The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* puts it this way: "*Consecration must precede conquest. There was some unfinished business and it was spiritual in character. It was time for renewal.*"

Spiritual renewal - faithful, obedient devotion to God - is more important than any effort we're undertaking, even if we're doing it *for* the Lord. Put together here, we have this wonderful example of how a living faith in the God of the Bible operates. God sat them down and said, "I see you believe, but your belief in My promises has to work itself out in *real life* obedience to Me." They did believe. They crossed the Jordan, they were ready to receive what had been offered to them, but

---

<sup>7</sup> Irving Jensen *Joshua: Rest-land Won*

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Gangel *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Joshua*

<sup>9</sup> *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

*first*, they would have to personally obey. Faithfulness is demonstrated in obedient activity. In the New Testament, James puts it this way: Faith without works is dead. Faith without works is useless.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, it wasn't just that God wanted each of these men to do this physical thing and check a box. This was about personal devotion - personal fidelity. God wanted their *hearts*. This generation of Israelites had been given Deuteronomy, a re-telling of God's Law and His intentions for them. And again and again the Lord spoke to them about their hearts and filling the heart with the Word of God and following the Lord from the heart. In Deuteronomy 30 we read:

**Deuteronomy 30:6 - 'The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live.**

That's what God wanted. The *physical* circumcision was the act of a faith that was rooted in the heart. It was an acknowledgement that the spiritual relationship between God and man was the most important part of everything they were doing. Everything else was secondary. Everything else could wait. And this is not just an Old Testament, tribes of Israel principle. This is still the truth for us today. Not that we are to follow the Mosaic Law - Christ fulfilled the Law. We "no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, [we] live under the freedom of God's grace."<sup>11</sup> But in this Joshua story we learn that the most important objective we have in life is to be in step with the Lord - to be devoted and set apart to Him, obeying what He says not just in *thought* but in real *action*.

For the New Testament believer, "circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit."<sup>12</sup> It means to be a person submitted to the Word of God and in a personal relationship with Him. A relationship where we "worship by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh."<sup>13</sup>

That must come before any effort we hope to succeed in. If you want to have meaningful life success in your place in history, in your marriage, in your parenting, in your field of study, in whatever campaign you find yourself, the *first* consideration is heart circumcision. Because from the heart comes obedience and when we obey, God's grace works out through our lives in powerful ways that we can not accomplish on our own.

And we can see God's astounding grace on display in this passage. *None* of these men were circumcised, the *one* thing that had designated Hebrews as being members of a covenant with God since the time of Abraham. And yet, even though they were all outside the agreement, even though none of them were even qualified to observe the Passover, still God walked with them. For forty years! He led them and He made the way for them and He did the impossible for them because He loved them so much. When they were faithless, He remained faithful. That is the grace of God. But now they were at a turning point and they were brought to a decision: Would they submit and do what God asked even though it would be difficult and contrary to human wisdom?

---

<sup>10</sup> James 2:20-26

<sup>11</sup> Romans 6:14 (NLI)

<sup>12</sup> Romans 2:29

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 3:3

**Joshua 5:3 - <sup>3</sup> So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelite men at Gibeath-haaraloth.**

There's no montage here of training the troops or making weapons of war. You always have that in battle movies like *Shang-Chi* or *The Last Samurai* or *The Two Towers*. The only thing that Joshua makes are ceremonial knives. There would be no combat practice, just long days of recovery.

Most of us can think of that image of the flag being raised at Iwo Jima. It's an incredible image that makes us consider what it cost and what it was for and why it mattered. There's a symbol like that here in verse 3. The name Gibeath-haaraloth means "Hill of the Foreskins." According to the census given in Numbers, more than 600,000 men would've been circumcised that day.<sup>14</sup> Though somewhat grotesque, what an incredible testimony this was of their obedience and their faith - a monument to their willingness to cut away that which would put distance between them and the Lord and slow down that which He wanted to accomplish in their lives. A symbol of trust in God.

**Joshua 5:6-7 - <sup>6</sup> For the Israelites wandered in the wilderness forty years until all the nation's men of war who came out of Egypt had died off because they did not obey the Lord. So the Lord vowed never to let them see the land he had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>7</sup> He raised up their sons in their place; it was these Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised, since they had not been circumcised along the way.**

It's striking to see that earlier generation described as "men of war." The Lord had wanted so much to give them the land and the victories in it. Instead of becoming the men of war God wanted them to be, they became men of complaining, men of grumbling, men of resentment and disbelief. They chose a fleshly way of living with a human mindset instead of trusting the Lord. And so, others were raised up in their place. They fought in a few battles, but they gave away the chance to become the conquest generation.

Their unwillingness to obey the Lord and trust Him resulted in a life of wandering. They ultimately made no progress. They just moved from place to place, wasting year after year of life.

God does not bless those who won't submit to His leading. In the Proverbs we're told that to reject God's wisdom and His commands makes you a fool and a fool wastes any treasure he finds. God isn't going to help us waste our lives. He wants incredible things for us, but if we refuse Him, then He will raise up others to be used in our place. This was Mordecai's message to Esther.

**Joshua 5:8-9 - <sup>8</sup> After the entire nation had been circumcised, they stayed where they were in the camp until they recovered. <sup>9</sup> The Lord then said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the disgrace of Egypt from you." Therefore, that place is still called Gilgal today.**

---

<sup>14</sup> Number 26:51

This was a time before ice and Tylenol. A few medical sources I consulted put the recovery time between 10 days and 6 weeks. Not only would they lose the element of surprise and give their enemies time to fortify (which they did),<sup>15</sup> they actually became weak and vulnerable, with only God to protect them. From a military planning perspective, this was *folly*.

Sometimes God's commands put us in a position like this. But we don't have to fear being vulnerable in God's hands. Remember: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."<sup>16</sup> Life isn't about strategy, it's about trust.

Any battle strategist would've said, "We've lost our advantage. It's going to be much harder now to win a victory because we spent all this time doing something that seems so unimportant." But, in reality, this was the most important thing they could've done. One of the lessons the book of Joshua teaches us is that the only thing that could defeat Israel was Israel. If they sinned, if they forgot God, if they embraced their own wisdom instead of the Lord's, *that* was the only thing that could stop what God wanted to do in and through their lives.

The same principle is spiritually for us. No weapon formed against us can succeed. Nothing in the world can overcome us. No temptation is too great for us to withstand. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. *But* we can fall into traps by failing to believe and obey what He has told us and where He is leading us. When we leave the camp of His grace and go far afield after our own desires and our own strategies and our own destinations, *that* is when we fall into defeat. When we trust God and stand in His truth, there's nothing to fear. Because the Lord's strength is vast and with it He prepares us for every circumstance and adversary of life.

What was the disgrace of Egypt? Bible scholars don't agree. What's important is that it was *God* who rolled it away. They weren't *earning* God's grace through circumcision. They were agreeing to receive it and demonstrating that they believed the Lord and trusted Him and wanted closeness to Him more than they wanted plunder or glory in battle or anything else. And they trusted Him enough to *obey*. They had seen first hand how the Lord had been faithful to their parents' generation, yet their parents had been unfaithful. This group didn't want to make the same mistake.

Of course, in the end, Joshua will say to them, "Hey, you've all seen what the Lord has done for us. But you are drifting away. Choose this day who you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Again, Joshua renewed his faithful obedience to this loving and faithful God. Will we be faithful? Will we follow the Lord, setting aside anything He asks us to, trusting that He knows the best way forward? Settling that issue is the most important thing any of us could do today.

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey*

---

<sup>15</sup> Joshua 6:1

<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25