

# The Lord Your God Goes Before You

## God's Work in the Book of Joshua

### *The Renewal of Covenant*

5:2-12

#### **Focus Attention:**

How would you rate each of these in your life?

	Necessity	Luxury
daily Bible reading		
regular times for prayer		
personal devotional time		
fellowship with the saints		
meditation on God's word		
servicing the needs of others		

Why did you pick what you did? What difference does it make?

#### **Focus on the Word:**

##### **Time to take possession of the inheritance ... but not yet. (vv 2-3)**

The Israelites had just been through an amazing experience. God had stopped the waters of the flooded Jordan River and gave them safe, dry, and unhindered passage into the land of promise. One would have thought that the time was right for Joshua to mobilize the army and immediately begin the conquest of the land.

- The people of Israel are energized and they are unified behind Joshua and the Lord (4:14).
- The people of Canaan are demoralized and have melted in fear (5:1).

Instead, the people make camp and focus on other matters. "At that time the Lord said to Joshua, 'Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.'" It had likely been 38 years since the Israelites had practiced the rite of circumcision – since the rejection of God's promises at Kadesh Barnea when they refused to enter the land (Num 13-14). God instructs Joshua to restore the practice with the people of God.

But why here and why now? Why stop the forward movement of the people for this painful renewal of ritual? The events in Joshua 5 take place over a period of at least 10 days (or perhaps, as some commentators believe, as much as 35 days). The people march around the walls of Jericho another 6 days after that. It was at least 2 weeks (or maybe as much as 6 weeks) before the Israelites have their first military victory in the land.

Why the wait? God's timing and man's timing are very different. We have the tendency to "strike while the iron's hot." God, on the other hand, was more concerned that the people were truly ready for conquest. The first weeks in Canaan were a time for preparation.

**A. Before the people take possession ... God desired to restore His covenant relationship with Israel. (vv 4-7)**

1. Circumcision had special meaning for the Israelites.
  - a. The rite was not unheard of among the peoples of the time. Normally it was a rite of passage connected with puberty and it afforded the participant certain political, social and religious privileges.
  - b. Circumcision for the Israelites, dating all the way back to its inauguration with Abraham, had a uniquely covenantal aspect. (This was not found in any other ancient culture.) The physical sign had tremendous spiritual significance of the special relationship God had with His people (Gen 17).
    - i. Physically, the rite of circumcision reminded the Jews that they were a "marked people." The physical cutting of the flesh around the male reproductive organ had several implications.
      - (a) It was a permanent sign of the divine relationship for which they had been chosen. One who had not been circumcised was prohibited from participating in other aspects of the relationship.
      - (b) It was a reminder that the covenant was not for one generation only but for all generations who would be born.
      - (c) It was a symbol of complete separation from sinfulness, focusing on the most obvious and degrading sins of the flesh: adultery, fornication, sodomy, etc.
      - (d) It was a symbol of the separation they were to have from idolatry, the worship of which included a tremendous amount of sexuality and sensuality.
    - ii. Circumcision was more than physical, though. The physical sign was to represent the spiritual transformation God desired for His people. The "cutting away of the flesh" had application to the intents and desires of the heart: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deut 10:16).
2. "Israel was to understand that circumcision was not simply a cutting of flesh; also their lives were to be holy. This is why at Gilgal God said, in effect, 'Before I fight your battles in Canaan you must have this mark of the covenant in your flesh.'" <The Bible Knowledge Commentary>

3. “The new generation was now in their inheritance ... and it was important that they renew their covenant relationship with the Lord. If during their wilderness journey Israel was tempted to sin, how much more they would be tempted now that they were living in the land! They would be surrounded by pagan people with immoral religious practices, and they would be tempted to compromise with their enemies. Later, this is exactly what future generations did, because they forgot the true meaning of circumcision.” <Weirsbe, p 58>
4. To inherit the promise, the people had to be in covenant with God. Without the sign of circumcision, they could not truly be considered to be in covenant. God did not want there to be any doubt about His covenant with the people.

**B. Before the people take possession ... God desired to test their faith. (v 8)**

1. The timing of the mass renewal of covenant was interesting.
  - a. The healing process after circumcision required several days. The text of Joshua 5 seems to indicate a 3-day healing period. If this was the case, the healing must have been aided along by God. Normally, the healing after circumcision would have taken around 3 weeks. (This has led some to believe the celebration of the Passover in verse 10 actually took place the next month.)
  - b. During this time of healing, the Israelite camp would have been extremely vulnerable to attack. Only the men under the age of 38 would have been subjects of circumcision. Those under the age of 20 at Kadesh Barnea would have already been circumcised and would have been among those entering the land. Those already circumcised would have represented about 1 of every 4 men. That would have left 75% of the fighting force incapacitated for the extended period of time.
  - c. Furthermore, Gilgal (as the place of this circumcision came to be known) was only about a mile northeast of the city of Jericho. It was within visual range of the first mighty opponent the Israelites would come up against.
2. Why did God instruct the renewing of His covenant at this place at this time? Why not provide the safety of the east side of the Jordan for such a vulnerable occasion? Why did God open His people up to such a golden opportunity for their enemies to attack and wipe them out? (A similar situation from Genesis 34 was surely on the minds of the people.)
3. God wanted Joshua and the people to trust His power and timing, not their own. This was a tremendous test of faith, and apparently Joshua and the people passed the test without any hesitation. Those of the earlier generation had not been so faithful with their tests of faith in the wilderness journey. But these people are ready to follow God implicitly.

**C. Before the people take possession ... God desired to remove their reproach. (v 9)**

1. The name given to the first Israelite encampment was *Gilgal*, a direct reference to what God did for Israel in this renewal of covenant. The name is similar to the Hebrew word for “roll.” “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”

2. What was “the reproach of Egypt”?
  - a. Some have suggested it referred to their slavery in Egypt. In taking possession of the land of promise, God is rolling back the wasted years of bondage. It should be remembered, though, that it was God who provided for Israel in Egypt to begin with. The Egyptian bondage did not come about because of Israel’s sin or unfaithfulness. It was, instead, the result of a Pharaoh’s paranoia.
  - b. Others have the opinion that the “reproach” came about out of years of idol worship in Egypt. They had even carried some of these idols with them across the Red Sea.
  - c. Still others suggest that the Israelites had been prevented from being circumcised during their time in Egypt. Circumcision was a privilege of the ruling class, they presume. Therefore the Israelites had no opportunity to participate in this covenant sign.
  - d. The best explanation is probably to be found in Israel’s unfaithfulness at Kadesh Barnea. God threatened to destroy the people after they refused to follow Him into the land, but Moses forcefully defended the people asking God how Israel’s destruction would reflect on Him (Num 14:11-14). When Israel turned and wandered in the wilderness for forty years, the nation faced the ridicule of its enemies for failing to experience the promises for which they were taken out of Egypt. They were subjected to the reproach (or criticism) of their enemies, in particular Egypt who had suffered for defying God Almighty.
3. God “rolled away their reproach” by fulfilling the promises of the covenant with them. No longer could any opponent say that God did not do what He said He would do. No longer could an enemy ridicule the nation as a people who cannot have what they boasted about in their relationship with God.

**D. Before the people take possession ... God desired to qualify them to eat the Passover. (vv 10-11)**

1. The Israelites had likely only celebrated the Passover twice before: (1) on the night that they were “passed over” when the firstborn of Egypt died; (2) at the foot of Sinai when the Law was given. The feast was intended to be an annual memorial to remember the deliverance God had so powerfully and graciously given them.
2. In order to celebrate the feast, the people had to be in covenant with God. An uncircumcised person was not allowed to join in (Ex 12:43-48).
3. Here again we find a sense of God’s timing. The Passover had been celebrated in connection with their deliverance out of the bondage to the Egyptians and with the giving of God’s words for holy living. Now at the appointed time for Passover, God leads the people across the Jordan to enter into the inheritance promised them through Abraham. It is a fitting time to be reminded of God goodness and faithfulness.
4. Before they can celebrate God’s faithfulness, however, they are assured of their standing with God through the renewal of circumcision.

**E. Before the people take possession ... God desired for them to experience a taste of His fulfilled promises. (v 12)**

1. Part of God's promised inheritance included "a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant" (Deut 6:10-11). After God renews His covenant with the people, He gives them a little taste of what is to come.
2. The manna that had sustained the people throughout their wilderness wanderings had been a wondrous gift from a gracious God. Now that the people had set foot in their new home, God gives another wondrous gift – the fulfillment of His promises to provide – and the daily provision of manna ends. It is one of many physical signs of God's faithfulness He will show them along the way. God gives them a small sign that God's promises are indeed about to be fulfilled.

***Focus on Life***

As we have maintained, the conquest of Canaan provides us an abundance spiritual truths for our own walk with God. We have entered into an inheritance through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. We would do well to learn the lessons of Joshua as we going about the work of taking possession of our inheritance.

What should we take with us from Israel's experience at Gilgal?

**A. Preparation is essential to receiving our inheritance in Christ.**

1. It is possible to do all the right things – things that are symbols of our inheritance in Christ – and still not experience the promises of God.
2. Joshua could have launched forth in conquest relying on the energy and excitement of the people and still have missed out on God's power and provision.
3. How many times have we today missed out on experiencing God's power and provision because we relied too heavily on our own strength, ingenuity and ability, and too little on God's power? How often have we insisted impatiently on our own timing instead of waiting on God to work and act as His wisdom dictates?

**B. Preparation by paying attention to our covenant relationship with God is essential to receiving our inheritance in Christ.**

1. It is possible to do all the right things – things that resemble an inheritance in Christ – and still not live in a covenant relationship with Christ.
2. We have been brought into covenant with God through the blood of Jesus Christ. "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Rom 5:1-2).

3. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant the people of Israel relied on as a reminder of the covenant.
  - a. It was a seal signifying the covenant relationship (Rom 4:11).
  - b. It was a sign of the holiness God demanded of the people in covenant (Rom 2:25-29).  
Do we have something similar today?
4. Ephesians 2:13-14 The gift of the Holy Spirit is a seal signifying our covenant relationship.
  - a. We are a people who do not live according to flesh but according to spirit (Rom 8:5-8; Gal 5:16-24).
  - b. Because of this it is important that we “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). We are not to “put out the Spirit’s fire” in our lives (1 Thess 5:19). We are to cultivate the spiritual mind so that we can understand and embrace the things of God (1 Cor 2:14-16).
  - c. To be fully prepared to receive my inheritance in Jesus Christ, I must do those things that foster my relationship with the Spirit of Christ. We sometimes call these “spiritual disciplines.” Prayer, meditation, confession, study, worship, fellowship ... all of these are avenues to focus the heart and the mind on the things of the Spirit.
5. Colossians 2:11-15 Burial with Christ in baptism gives us new life as a holy and sanctified people in covenant with God.
  - a. The old body of sin and death is abolished in baptism (Rom 6). In baptism we are washed clean of the impurities that would defile soul and spirit (1 Cor 6:11). We can draw near to God because we have been cleansed of all guilt (Heb 10:22).
  - b. To be fully prepared to receive my inheritance in Jesus Christ, I must continually become what I have already been made in Jesus Christ (Phil 2:12; Rom 12:1-2). I must continue to rid myself of thoughts, actions and attitudes that are opposed to the holiness to which I have been called, and press on to fill my life with the thoughts, actions and attitudes that do reflect holiness.

### ***Focus on Tomorrow***

Luxury or necessity? When we understand the importance of fostering our covenant relationship with God, those things that strengthen our relationship become more and more necessities of life. We cannot live without them! In fact, spending time growing in and celebrating our covenant relationship is an act of faith trusting God to take care of the other demands for my time and energy.

How do you need to focus on your covenant relationship with God? What will you do this week to prepare better to take possession of your inheritance in Jesus Christ?