

A Divine Delay

Turn with me to Joshua 5. To briefly recap, in chapters 3-4 we saw how God had the priests carry the ark of the covenant (representing God's presence) into the Jordan and the water immediately stopped flowing and started piling up about a mile upstream. The Israelites walked safely to the other side. So after 40 years of wandering in the desert, they are finally in the Promised Land.

Joshua 5:1

Everyone in Canaan has heard about God drying up the Jordan and they're scared to death. The Bible says their hearts melted and they had no spirit left in them. It means they're too terrified to put up a fight.

Tactically speaking, this is the perfect time to attack. They are right where you want them, don't give them time to regain their composure or rally the troops, the land is ready for the taking. So it must have surprised Israel when God said, "hold up. The land *is* ready to be taken, but you're not ready to take it. First there are some things that need to happen before you will be ready to take the land."

Has it ever happened to you where a situation or an opportunity seemed so right, but the door closes? The job that seemed tailor made for you but was given to someone else. That relationship that seemed to be going so well – you were sure she was the right one, he was the right one, but then suddenly ends. The promotion you were so sure was yours, but they passed over you and gave it to someone else. When a door of opportunity opens up, and as far as we can see it seems perfect, and then it closes on us, it can be incredibly confusing and disappointing. We can struggle with feeling that God has let us down, or that He doesn't care. But God does care and wants the best for His children and He knows better than us what is best for us. And It might be, like with Israel, that God isn't denying it, He's delaying it. Sometimes – and I stress *sometimes* – God delays us from taking new land not because the land isn't ready for us, but because we're not ready for it.

There were three things that needed to happen before the Jews would be ready to take the land.

1. They needed to get right with God and have their reproach lifted (vv. 2-9)

God had given Israel circumcision as a symbol of their covenant relationship with Him and for centuries Israel carefully obeyed this command, but we find out that for the 40 years they wandered in the desert they had stopped circumcising their male children. Which means that for 40 years Israel not only wandered, they drifted. Drifted away from obedience to God's command. They needed to make this right, they needed to get right with God.

Circumcision was an external sign of Israel's covenant with God and was meant to convey the inner work of God on the heart of the believer.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. Rom. 2:28-29

Circumcision is the cutting away of flesh and symbolizes God cutting away the flesh from our hearts. The Bible tells us that our biggest problem is our "flesh" - not our skin, but our fleshly desires that control us

and invariably bend us away from God and towards sin. The Bible tells us that the flesh can't be reformed – the only answer for the flesh is to kill it, to cut it off. When Jesus died, we died with him, meaning our flesh was crucified with Christ. Baptism is an outward symbol of our dying with Christ (we go under) and being raised with Christ in newness of resurrection life. (Nov. 24th!)

So when we put our faith in Jesus Christ in God's eyes we are legally dead to our flesh and raised in newness of life, but then the Spirit goes to work on our hearts to make that true in our experience. To make us holy. And He does it by cutting away at the flesh of pride, lust, anger, selfishness, laziness, rebellion. Cutting away the sinful cravings that deceive and destroy us.

There's a commercial running recently on Spotify promoting that with Chili's delivery service you can get good food anywhere, at your home, your parent's vegan barbecue, and, as the last person says, ***"Welcome to my therapist's office, where it's ok to eat your feelings, and quesadillas."***

I'd never heard that phrase "eat your feelings" before, so I looked it up. Here's what Lisa Lieberman-Wang had to say about what it means to eat your feelings:

It means you are trying to make true the statement that "the way to a person's heart is through his/her stomach." It means you see your feelings and food on the same plate, and the only way to get rid of those feelings is to eat all your food...and then some. It means there is something so painful, so intolerable deep inside you that you will use food to annihilate it.

She goes on to write:

Not only does emotional eating give your power away, it gives it away to something that remains at the mercy of your choices. It processes nothing, heals nothing, fills nothing. What's empty isn't your stomach, it's your soul.

This isn't just true of food. All our fleshly cravings promise to fulfill our lives but instead work to destroy our lives. Cravings like self-absorbed pride (look at me, look at me!) or self-pity (feel sorry for me - I'm such a victim), or lust or greed or you name it, we're trying to fill our hearts and souls with something that processes nothing, heals nothing, and fills nothing. The more we try to fill ourselves with these desires, the emptier our souls become.

The Holy Spirit does a sweet work in our hearts, cutting away at these fleshly desires, replacing them with desires that do process, heal, and fill – desires for Christ, desires to know God, desires for righteousness and purity, desires to love people, desires for eternal glory.

All of this good work is symbolized in the renewal of the covenant of circumcision and in verse 9 God says, "today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." At first Egypt feared and respected the God of Israel after the miraculous way He delivered them, but now they've watched Israel doing circle 8's for 40 years in the desert and their respect turned to reproach. They began to mock the Jews – "some God you got there – His powerful hand led you into the wilderness...and got you lost! He freed you to die in the desert!"

When the church isn't right with God – when it's full of pride, bickering, immorality, gossip, worldliness – an unbelieving world is going to look on and mock. And honestly can we blame them? When we mess

up, when we do dumb things, when there is hypocrisy or corruption in the church, we shouldn't try to hide it, we should admit it.

What the church needs to do is get right with God. What the world needs to realize is that while sometimes the church deserves mockery, God never does. God is God. And He won't ever abandon or forget His people, He will work on us, and He will at times discipline us, but ultimately He will roll away our reproach off and glorify His name through His church.

God is getting them right with Him by renewing His covenant with them and rolling away their reproach. That is His work in us as well. The Spirit circumcises our hearts is to make us more like Jesus, making our witness credible and worthy of respect in the world, rolling away our reproach.

2. They needed to recognize the completion of one chapter and the opening of a new one (vv. 10-12)

This is not just another Passover, it's their first Passover in the land God had promised to give them. 40 years earlier they had celebrated their first Passover believing the promise that God would deliver them out of Egypt. Now they are celebrating the completion of God's promise: He brought them out of bondage, and now He has brought them into the Promised Land. Think of it as a story arc: the first Passover looked ahead to the fulfillment of God's promises, and this first Passover in the Promised Land completes the arc by celebrating the fulfillment of God's promises.

There is a beautiful correlation in this to our own celebration of Passover, what we know as communion.

*So they prepared the Passover. ¹⁴ When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ **For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.**"*

*¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸ **For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.**" **Luke 22:13b-18***

See the same story arc? Jesus is serving the first communion looking ahead to our deliverance from sin and death by his death on the cross (this is my body, this is my blood), but Jesus also looks ahead to the final completion of the arc when those he has saved eat and drink it with him in the Kingdom of God – the ultimate Promised Land. Our ultimate hope is in God's greatest promise – through Jesus He has rescued us from an eternity separated from God and one day will welcome us into His eternal kingdom and all the joy and gladness that day will bring! Jesus will say, "let's throw a feast to celebrate!"

It says the very next day the manna that had fed them supernaturally for 40 years stopped coming. No longer was God going to hand-feed them. They had to work the land for their food now. That's a good change, but it's a big change and it might have been a tough adjustment for those who had grown up where all they had to do was pick their food up off the ground. Now they had to work for it.

God brings change into our lives – we go from one chapter to another, one season to another. Sometimes He deals with us one way in one season and another way in the next season. Life inevitably brings change and there are distinct lines we cross over from one season to another. We go from elementary school to jr. high to high school, from high school to college. Some go from single to married.

Some have children. Those children go from bouncy, silly kids who need so much time and attention, to teenagers, to adults. Lines are silently crossed all the time as if we're crossing various Jordan Rivers into new land and we can never cross back over those Jordan Rivers.

Change can be exhilarating and it can be disorienting. Some people love change, some people hate change. Either way, change comes. God stopped providing for Israel through manna, but He didn't stop providing for them. He just changed *how* He provided for them. Change comes but our God never changes. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's immutability anchors our souls in His unchanging faithfulness and unending love. Anchored in Christ we can adapt to change successfully, knowing that God might be meeting us differently, or providing for us differently, but God isn't different. Jesus isn't different. When we know and believe that deep inside we can accept change knowing we are anchored in the unchanging faithfulness of God.

3. Israel needed their perspective realigned to God's perspective (vv. 13-15)

There is something really strange about this. Joshua is apparently spying out the city of Jericho and in the distance he sees a man standing with a sword. Joshua goes to him and asks, "are you for us or our enemies?" It's an "either or" question. "I'm for you" or "I'm for your enemies". But this mysterious man says, "no, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come."

Joshua asks the wrong question cause his perspective is off. He wants to know if this man is there to serve his army or his enemy's army. This man – who I believe is Jesus preincarnate– isn't there to take sides, he's there to take charge. He is the commander of God's army. Joshua's question, "are you fighting for our cause" is the wrong question. The right question is, who is fighting for the Lord's cause?

That's always the right question. Whose cause are we fighting for? Whose agenda are we working for? When we try to get God on our agendas we need to have our perspective realigned. God isn't a cosmic bellhop waiting to carry our luggage where we want to go, fighting for our agendas. God is the majestic King over all and there are only ever two sides: for Him or against Him.

Joshua needed to be reminded of that. I often do too. You probably do too. God's way is always best. He wasn't delaying Israel from taking the land to hurt them, it was what was best for them. It was a divine delay. God sometimes has to delay giving us land He ultimately wants us to have. Maybe we need to get some things right with Him. Maybe the pause is to give us time to recognize what He has already done, and prepare us for the changes ahead. Or it might be to realign our perspective with His and our agenda with His. Sometimes momentum can make us think it's all about us and our thing, but it is. It's always about Christ and his thing. We exist to glorify his name.

Getting our hearts right. Recognizing the completion of a chapter and the beginning of a new one. Realigning our perspective with God's perspective. He is God, He is our Lord, He is our Savior, and like Joshua we want to bow before him and worship him. If there's a delay going on in your life, consider that it may be God is doing one or all three of these things and give yourself completely over to His good work.