

The Captain of the Lord's Army (Joshua 5:13-15)



Introduction

Joshua chapter 5 describes the consecration of the people of Israel in preparation for the great task that lay before them. As such, it stands as a bridge between the crossing of the Jordan and the beginning of the military campaigns to subjugate the inhabitants of the Land. For many, however, especially to those trained in military tactics, this chapter may seem like an enigma, at least from man's point of view. And of course, that's precisely the issue here. God's ways are infinitely higher than our ways. From all appearances now was the time to attack the enemy. The people of Israel were filled with the excitement and motivation of having miraculously crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Further, they apparently knew the enemy was in disarray from the standpoint of their morale (5:1); surely, it was time to strike. Many of the military leaders under Joshua's command may have been thinking or even saying, "For goodness sake, let's not wait. Let's go! Now is the logical time and the enemy is ripe for the taking!"

But in God's economy and plan there are spiritual values, priorities, and principles that are far more vital and fundamental to victory or our capacity to attack and demolish the fortresses that the world has raised up against the knowledge and plan of God (2 Cor. 10:4-5). Looking at conditions from our perspective of deadlines, feeling the pressure to perform and accomplish things to please people and sometimes our own egos, we are too often in a hurry to get the show on the road. But to be victorious or successful from God's standpoint, certain things are essential if we are going to attack the various fortresses of life in His strength and according to His principles. Perhaps, a letter written by an Englishman during World War II may illustrate the point:

As one man, the whole nation has handed over all its resources to the Government. We have invested the Cabinet with the right to conscript any of us for any task, to take our goods, our money, our all. Never have rich men set such little store by their wealth; never have we been so ready to lay down life itself, if only our cause may triumph.¹ Before Israel was ready to face the enemy, they too needed a similar preparation of heart and willingness to submit to God's directions that they might also experience His power. To ensure that, God took them through several events to instruct and prepare them for battle.

Chapter 5 falls into five instructive sections with each one being fundamental to victory.

These include:

(1) A statement regarding the morale of the inhabitants of the land (5:1). Essential to spiritual victory is our understanding that in Christ, all the enemies we face are in essence defeated foes (cf. Rom. 6; Col. 2:1-15; Heb. 2:14).

(2) The renewal of the rite of circumcision (5:2-9). As a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, circumcision stood for Israel's faith in God's promises which included the possession of the land as their inheritance. It was an act of faith and spiritual preparation.

(3) The observance of the Passover (5:10). By partaking of the Passover, Israel was to relive their deliverance out of Egypt by the blood of the Lamb, but as with circumcision, this too was related to the land. As observing the Passover in Egypt protected them from the destroying angel, it also assured them of two more things: (a) that just as crossing the Red Sea would be followed by the destruction of the Egyptians, (b) so likewise the crossing of the Jordan would be followed by the defeat of the Canaanites. *Remembering the past became an excellent preparation of faith for the tests of the future.*

(4) Eating of the produce of the land with the ceasing of the manna (5:11-12). Observing the Passover stood for God's deliverance out of Egypt and from judgment of the destroying angel, but for God's covenant people, deliverance from Egypt included the promise they would inherit the land, a land of abundance, a land of wheat, barley, fig trees, olive oil and honey (cf. Deut. 8:8-9). It spoke of their new beginning, of their new life as the people of God delivered from judgment and rock solid in the place of blessing. May I repeat the principle: *the Passover not only looked back, but it looked forward to their new life in the land enjoying its abundant blessings by the power of God, and so eating of the produce was an act of confirmation of God's abundant blessing.*

(5) Joshua's encounter with the Captain of the hosts of the Lord (5:13-15). This becomes the last key event of preparation. But why this encounter?

With everything apparently now prepared for the conquest of the land, the next scene opens with Joshua, God's appointed commander of Israel, not in the camp of Israel at Gilgal, but by the city of Jericho. What do you suppose Joshua was doing there? He was surely about the Lord's work and gathering information about the city and its fortifications in preparation to launch his attack. He was naturally concerned about several things. First of all, he needed a plan of action. Just how would they go about attacking Jericho, probably the best fortified city of Canaan? Besieging a city like Jericho

was something for which they had little or no experience. Further, they undoubtedly lacked equipment like battering rams, catapults, scaling ladders or moving towers. All they had were swords, arrows, slings, and spears which naturally would seem totally inadequate for the task before them. So how would Joshua prepare his army and how should they go about taking the city? He must have felt like the weight of the world was pressing down on his shoulders.

Can we fault Joshua for being at Jericho and surveying the situation? Absolutely not. In fact, another great leader, Nehemiah, did the same when faced with the fallen condition of the walls of Jerusalem. But nevertheless, Joshua needed an encounter with the God he served that he might grasp afresh an important truth, one that was equally vital as part of his preparation for victory by the power of God. As all of God's saints tend to get their eyes on the enormous tasks facing them at times, something was missing in Joshua's perspective or mindset as he looked over the city of Jericho. Perhaps he simply needed to be reminded of some very important truth for both clarification and encouragement.

Suddenly, while surveying the situation, Joshua was confronted with a man standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand.

Joshua 5:13a. 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, . . .

The Man's Position

With Joshua's mind engrossed in his concerns about the task before him and feeling the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders, he looks up and there stands a man with sword drawn. What kind of picture does this bring to mind and what does it mean? Standing with any weapon drawn is a military position of one who either stands guard or who stands ready to go against a foe defensively or offensively. Standing with sword drawn suggested he was there to fight either against, or with, or for Israel.

The Man's Identity

Verse 14 will tell us that this man came as the “captain of the hosts of the Lord,” the commander of the Lord’s army. Joshua’s response in verse 14b and the statement of the captain in verse 15 show this was a theophany, or better, based on the truth of John 1:1-18, it was a Christophany. A Christophany is a manifestation of the preincarnate Christ, who, as the *Logos*, is the one who reveals God. If only a man or an angel, he would certainly have repelled Joshua’s worshipful response (vs. 14). Compare the response of Paul in Acts 14:8-20 to those who wanted to make them into gods and the response of the angel to John in Revelation 19:10.

Here then, the preincarnate Christ appears to Joshua to teach, guard, and reinforce certain vital truths for God’s people and especially for those in positions of leadership, which really includes all believers to some degree.

Joshua’s Question (vs. 13b)

. . . and Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us or for our adversaries?”

This was a natural response to a man with his sword drawn and it expressed Joshua’s concern as well as his courage. No one from the army of Israel should have been there for evidently no orders had been given for anyone to leave the camp. So who was this stranger who suddenly appeared out of nowhere? Surely, Joshua thought, “Since he is not one of ours, could he be the enemy, or perhaps someone who has come to help us?”

But in view of the answer given to Joshua, Joshua’s question reveals a typical mindset that poses a threat and a hindrance to our effectiveness in the service of the Savior. What then is that mindset? We tend to see the battles we face as *our* battles and the forces we face as forces marshaled against *us* and *our* individual causes, concerns, agendas, and even *our* theological beliefs or positions on doctrine. And in a sense, that is true, if we are truly standing in the cause of Christ. But there is another sense in which that is simply not true, and that is the issue here.

The Answer Given to Joshua (vs. 14a)

And he said, “No, rather I indeed come now as captain of the host of the Lord.”

The answer comes in two parts. The first part of the answer is seen in a flat negation of either one of Joshua’s options. The first answer is simply a flat “neither.” Why didn’t he say, “I am here for you and for Israel”? But in essence, the man with the drawn sword said, “Neither; I am not here to take sides, yours or that of anyone else.”

The second part of the answer gives the reason. In other words, “I am here, not to take sides, but to take over and take charge as Commander of the Lord’s army.”

This is so important and lays down two principles that are foundational for all of life and our warfare against the forces of the world and Satan. Now, there is no question that the Lord was there with the armies of heaven to secure Jericho and this so God’s people could possess their God-given inheritance, the Land, yet a certain perspective was vital for true success.

The first principle: It was not for Joshua to claim God’s allegiance for *his* cause no matter how right and holy it might be. Rather, the need was for Joshua to acknowledge God’s claim over Joshua for God’s purposes. We tend to approach our battles and causes backwards; we turn things all around and try to marshal God to support *us* rather than to *submit* and *follow* Him. Certainly, the battle was a joint venture, God and the people of Israel under Joshua’s leadership as appointed by the Lord (1:1-9). But Joshua, as with all of us in the army of the King, must be following the Lord, submitting to His authority, taking our orders from Him, and resting the battle in His hands because we realize it is really His battle as the *Supreme Commander*. There seems to be no question that Joshua understood this as evidenced by his question, “What has my Lord to say to his servant?” Here he was asking the Lord for orders and it was surely then that he received the directions for taking Jericho.

The second principle: As the one who had come to take charge, the Lord was also reminding Joshua (and us) of both God’s **personal presence** and His **powerful provision**, the provision of His vast hosts. The promise of God’s personal presence always carries with it the assurance of God’s personal care. Likewise, the promise of His powerful provision always carries with it the promise of His infinite supply and power no matter how impossible the problem may appear to us. So there was more, infinitely more, than

Joshua's army. There was Joshua and his army, but there was also the myriads of God's angelic forces who always stand ready to do God's bidding and to serve the saints. Three other passages can serve as helpful examples that we might grasp the issue here and its significance to our daily walk.

(1) First, compare 2 Kings 6:8-17. When Elisha was at Dothan with his young servant, he found himself surrounded by the army of Ben-Hadad, who, during the night had marched out and surrounded the city of Dothan. The next morning, when Elisha's servant went out to draw water, he saw the vast army surrounding the city. Being fearful and greatly distressed, he cried out to Elisha, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" Elisha responded, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Elisha then prayed a very interesting prayer. He said, "O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." We then read that "the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." They were not alone. With them to fight for them was a host of God's angelic forces who soon struck the armies of the king of Syria with blindness.

(2) A second example is found for us in Matthew 26:52-53. With the disciples still reluctant and perplexed over the fact Christ must go to the cross, Peter drew his sword and struck the high priest's slave cutting off his ear. Jesus replied, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

(3) A final example of God's angelic armies and their ministry to God's people is seen in Hebrews 1:14, which reads, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?"

In this, we see the second reason for the Commander's description of himself as "the Captain of the Lord's hosts." He was assuring Joshua of God's provision through His mighty angelic armies or His heavenly legions.

Joshua's Response (vs. 14b)

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?"

How we each need this response—the response of *worship* and *submission*. Joshua quickly got the picture. He had been thinking of a conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanite armies. Perhaps he had been thinking of this as *his* war. Certainly he felt the load of responsibility on his shoulders. But after being confronted by the divine Commander, he was reminded of a truth he had heard Moses declare many years earlier when they stood on the banks of the Red Sea. There he had heard Moses say, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Ex. 14:13b). Joshua learned afresh the truth that David too had learned and would later declare when facing Goliath, "the battle is the Lord's" (cf. 1 Sam. 17:47).

But that's not all. As an outworking of his worship and submission, we also see Joshua's inquiry, the inquiry of a servant looking to his Commander for direction with his words, "What has my lord to say to his servant?"

Do you remember Paul's response on the Damascus road, when he came to realize it was the glorified Lord who was speaking to him? He quickly answered, "What shall I do Lord?" (Acts. 28:10).

What a comfort and how encouraging to know that we never have to bear our burdens alone or face our enemies alone. Joshua was to know that the battles ahead and the entire conquest of Canaan was really God's conflict. What is our part? We are soldiers in His army, His servants for whom He abundantly supplies the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18).

While Dr. C.I. Scofield was pastor of the First Congregational Church of Dallas, there came a time when the burdens of the ministry seemed heavier than he could bear. All but crushed by the weight of the frustrations and problems of the work, he knelt one day in his office. In deep agony of spirit, he opened the Scriptures, looking for some message of comfort and strength. Led by the Spirit to the closing verses of Joshua 5, he saw at once that he was trying to carry the responsibilities alone. That day he turned his ministry over to the Lord, assured that it was His work and that He could accomplish it. In accepting God's leadership, Dr. Scofield allied himself with God's power.

Surely, these verses drive home the truth of Christ's *preeminence* and *lordship*. He is the head of the church, indeed, the King of kings and Lord of lords. The passage also reminds us that God is not present to fight *our* battles or help in *our* causes or jump to *our* rescue when we get in trouble as though He were a genie in a bottle. Instead, it reminds us that the battle is His and that our role is that of soldier/servant. We are here to serve Him, to do His will, to follow Him and depend on Him completely.

The Commander's Final Revelation (vs. 15)

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." And Joshua did so.

In these last words of the Captain, there is a command, "Remove your sandals," and an explanation, "for the place where you are standing is holy."

Removing the sandals was a sign of servanthood and a sign of respect and submission. And the declaration of this place of encounter and revelation as holy ground calls attention to the special import of what Joshua had just learned and experienced.

God is not only the Holy One in our redemption through the provision of the suffering Savior, but He is the Holy One in our warfare through the Victorious Savior. *We can only enter into the battle so that we experience God's deliverance when we remove our sandals and submit to His authority and His presence and power.*

Here we see that the warfare of the Christian is a *holy calling*, but also a *divine undertaking* accomplished in those who humble themselves under the mighty hand of God.

1 Peter 5:6-7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.

Conclusion

In this passage, Joshua had an encounter with the living *Logos*, the very revelation of God. It was an encounter that lifted a great burden from his shoulders. The experience mentioned previously of Dr. Scofield illustrates the same truth through this very passage. May we all see how this illustrates how much we each need to be in the Word with a listening ear so God can teach us the things we need to hear.

Joshua, standing and perhaps also walking about the city of Jericho studying what lay before him and weighed down with the burden of his responsibility, is so very much like us today! We see the things we believe God has called us to do, but we are so prone to activity and running ahead more than we are to worship and inquiry from the Lord. Is our lifestyle such that it sends us out into battle mindful of the Lord and who He is to our every move, mindful of those principles of His Word that must guide our every thought and step and fortify us with the comfort of God?

May we, as we look over the battles or tasks that lie before us, look up and see the Commander of the Lord of hosts and remove our sandals.

1 Donald K. Campbell, *Joshua, Leader Under Fire*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1981, p. 39.

2 Campbell, p. 47.

Online Reference: <https://bible.org/article/captain-lord%E2%80%99s-army-joshua-513-15>