

Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus, are closer to us than we can know. Your love and compassion surround us and sustain us even when we are asleep, and our souls have no knowledge of anything. But you do not stop caring, loving, and working for our full salvation. We praise You, living Lord; AMEN

Prayer

Lead my heart to pray, dear God, to truly pray to You about everything that matters. For I need to know Your heart, and when I do not know, my thoughts and words and actions fail to grasp the bigger picture; and I find I get things wrong. So, feed me by the wisdom of Your Spirit, feed me through Your Word, and feed me in visions of the day or night; and I will never cease to pray and do my all to get things right, according to Your will. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Vision

There is a famous text in the Bible 'without vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18 - Authorised Version). Pray for God's guidance of His people in these troubled times.

On-going prayers

- Pray for people who are worried about their jobs at the moment
- Pray for missionaries and agencies attempting to feed the starving
- Give thanks for people who have recently been saved by grace

Meditation

If I have wandered down the wrong road,
You are always there one step ahead of me,
Creating another route back to Your pathway.

If I have cried the tears of loss or strife,
You are always ready with a touch of love
To draw my simple soul back again, to life.

If I have slipped upon the stony ground,
You are always there to lift me to my feet
And soothe my bruised ego with a quiet word.

If I have let myself jump too far ahead,
You are always there to take the impact
Redirecting my energies again, so graciously.

If I have been too keen to claim my credits,
You are always there to hold me back enough
To give the glory to the One who made me what I am.

Bible Study - Joshua 5:1-9

¹ When all the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan to the west and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them to face the Israelites.

² At that time the LORD said to Joshua, 'Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.' ³ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. ⁴ And this why Joshua circumcised them: all the males who came out of Egypt, all the men of military age, died on the

journey in the wilderness after they left Egypt. ⁵ Though all those who came out had been circumcised, yet all those who were born on the journey in the wilderness after they left Egypt had not been circumcised. (⁶ For the Israelites walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the men of military age who came out of Egypt perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD. The LORD swore to them that He would not let them see the land flowing with milk and honey that the LORD had sworn to their ancestors to give to us.) ⁷ So He raised up children in their place, and it was these that Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the journey. ⁸ When the circumcision of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. ⁹ And the LORD said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

Review

It is not very easy for us to read this story, for most of us can hardly imagine either the nature of the ceremony of circumcision on such a scale, or why it was felt to be so important to the Israelites that it was done. The Old Testament tells us that God required circumcision of Abraham as a sign of their covenant relationship (Genesis 17), but there is very little about circumcision within scripture after the story in Genesis 17 apart from this incident in Joshua. We know that the practice did not die out, of course, because by the time of Jesus, circumcision was virtually synonymous with being a Jew.

This passage tells its own story well, and gives us a clear explanation of the events from an Israelite point of view. We must remember that when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they would have been acutely aware that they had stood on the edge of the Promised Land once before (Numbers 13). On that occasion, they did not enter into the Land and failed the test of faith God set before them. This resulted in a serious incident (Numbers 14) in which God threatened to do away with the Israelites and create a new nation out of Moses (Num 14:12)! Moses successfully interceded for the people, but God refused to allow those who had rebelled against Him to see the Promised Land again, all that is except Joshua and Caleb, who had pleaded with the people to do what God required of them (Num 14:6f.)

It is interesting that our passage reduces this whole dramatic incident to the general comment in verse 6, 'they did not obey the voice of the Lord ... He swore to them that He would not let them see the land ...'. The result of all this was that those who now stood on the banks of the Jordan, just within the Promised Land, were the children born after that time, and they had not been circumcised. We do not know exactly why this had not been done, but it does illustrate the distance between God and His people over those forty years. Now, having shown obedience in the ceremonial entry into the Promised Land (chapter 4), the very duty in which their fathers had failed, the new generation proved themselves worthy to take up again the holy 'mark of God' which had first been given to Abraham.

The act of circumcision was done after crossing the Jordan and within the Promised Land, and it was done within sight of Israel's opponents. The kings of Canaan were obviously keeping a watchful eye on the Israelites, for they were living in fear of them (5:1). The gossip of the day said that the God of Israel was a warrior God who had enabled them to escape from Egypt, and such power was not easily turned away (see Numbers 22), so their hearts 'melted' (5:1). It is also worth remembering that after their own entry into Canaan, some of Jacob's sons (Genesis 34) had defeated an enemy by persuading them to be circumcised (with the promise that they would thereafter be able to marry the young women of Israel) and then slaughtering them 'while they were still sore' (Genesis 34:25). However,

the Canaanite kings were weak, and failed to take advantage of this moment of opportunity to take advantage of the Israelites (5:1). Indeed, the text says 'there was no spirit within them'; they were as good as defeated before the battles for the land had even begun! God's blessing on the people was demonstrated by the successful completion of the circumcision ceremony at a place called 'Gebeath-haaraloth' (meaning 'hill of the foreskins'), and the pronouncement by the Lord to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you,' (5:9). The term 'reproach of Egypt' was used to refer to the fact that the Egyptians used a form of partial circumcision which was an abhorrence to the Israelites, and full circumcision as practiced by the Israelites did away with the hint of any connection with Egypt from the Israelite's past.

Despite the unease we might naturally feel today about the practice of circumcision, this story is about the power of God to cleanse His people ready for action. Nowhere in the Old Testament do God's people launch into any deed required of them except by waiting on Him for some form of blessing or healing, or whatever the Lord needed to do with His people to make them fit for service. It is perhaps too common for us to assume we are ready for whatever the Lord wants of us, and proceed immediately with what we perceive to be the call we have received. The whole story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness and entry into the Promised Land warns us that although we are God's people by faith in Christ Jesus, we are still dependent upon God's timing, judgment and blessing, to do what He has set before us. It is a simple, but important point.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what way does God 'mark us out' as His people today, as an alternative sign to circumcision?
2. Is it important to recall past failures when seeking to go forward? Will this slow us down or teach us how to proceed?
3. Why does God give us instructions to do something and only begin to equip us as we do the task?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is a strong element of faith here in this passage. The people of Israel had to trust God completely in order to undergo this ceremony after they had crossed the Jordan. The challenge of faith never goes away, and we will find that once we have expressed faith in Jesus as God's Son and our Saviour, then the whole of life becomes a further test of that faith, with each test helping us grow in grace. This is something we should welcome, for through this means, our Lord is always preparing us for what lies ahead. We may not have to engage with occupying a foreign land, but the challenges may be equally demanding, both physically and spiritually.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Have you ever been brought back to a place where you have been before, and faced the challenge of succeeding where once you failed? It is a tough call. Yet this is often what God requires of us, and if He does, we must remember to wait on Him. Reflect on this and ask the Lord to prepare you for the days ahead.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to face their past failures and so be healed in their spirits. Pray that God will empower them to grow in grace and faith so that they will be able to go forward and not be constantly trapped in the past.*