



We got some really good news this week from our oldest daughter and we have been celebrating. A little over two years ago Katie embarked on a very intensive graduate program for physical therapy here in California while maintaining a serious relationship with a boy in Wisconsin. She finished her classwork and then got married and is now graduated and beginning her married life in Wisconsin. On Friday we heard that she was hired for her first job in her field. When I think about her preparation—going into battle every day to meet the challenges—it was truly an amazing thing to watch. We are so proud of both our children and look forward to seeing them meet their goals in life.

Some of the preparations we make seem to promise total victory if we just prepare well. But for those of us who have a little more mileage in this life, we realize that things don't always work out the way they are promised. We can plan and prepare for things in this life, but can we really put our hope in the plans and paths of success that our world determines? We will rejoice with our daughter and encourage our second daughter in her goals but the reality is we live in a fallen world. At any time our health can turn south and affect our planning... Our economy can take a dive.... The church can have a set back.... A parent can make a bad decision.... A Christian testimony can be destroyed by moral failure.... I can imagine my daughters reaching a natural crisis of faith, and will one day say to themselves, "We were sure led to believe one thing, but reality is quite different."

So it's at these points of crises of belief that God by his grace will step in if we invite him in to show us how to truly prepare for victory as God defines victory—to show us a place of rest that's found in one's identity in Jesus Christ, to show us purpose that God gives that is higher than any earthly purpose, to show us a place of using one's God-given talents and gifts in the spiritual battle we call ministry. Victory as God defines should look like an injection of God's grace and love into people trapped by disillusionment, loneliness, sin and bitterness who are searching for that place of rest that only Christ can provide.

Two years ago, according to Amazon, the most highlighted passage in all books read by Kindle as of November 2014 was from the second volume of the series of books called *The Hunger Games*. The passage reads: "Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them." (**Hunger Games, Volume 2**) Out of all the Kindle books, out of all the passages, including the Bible, this was the most highlighted.

*The Hunger Games* is the novel of a generation. It's about adolescents rigorously prepared by adults for desperate and meaningless life and death competitions. The story resonates with students who worry that they're all honed up with no place to go. They rack up majors, minors, certificates, credentials, internships to keep them in the running for what is defined as success. They are driven by fear. Students try to armor up with achievements that will insulate them from uncertainties in the job market, uncertainties about the substance of their dreams, uncertainties about the definition of success, uncertainties about their own self-worth.

If ever there were a people who should be prepared, ready to defeat their enemies, confident in the outcome, having racked up credentials and experiences, it was the Israelites. They had just crossed into the land promised to their ancestors, they were about to lay claim to this beautiful land that had been promised to them by God, and they had seen God show up as they crossed the Jordan River hours earlier on dry land. We could look up the word "prepared" in the dictionary and we should see a picture of Joshua and the Israelites going into Joshua chapter 5.

**Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites (v. 1).**

They were ready. The old saying, "Strike Now While the Iron is Hot" would certainly seem to apply here. Any military general would assess the situation and say, "Our enemy is on their heels, push the thing. Don't let them regroup." The world says, "Attack Now!" But God says, "Wait!" The world may see you as credentialed, certified, and ready for success, but there is life ahead of you and there is a big difference between worldly preparation and spiritual preparation.

What we are about to see in chapter 5 are three essential spiritual preparations that God insists are essential for true battlefield success. Do these preparations seem a little strange given our context? Yes, and I might add, to the world they make no sense at all. But I think we will see the spiritual preparation God requires of the Israelites will offer us relatable principles so we are equipped to deal with anything this harsh world requires us to deal with. Our key idea this morning is this: God prepares us to live victoriously in uncertain times.

## Prepare by Remembering Who Marks You

The world from the outside, and our flesh on the inside, entice us to receive permanent markings on our hearts that are not from God. Generally the markings from the world boil down the promises made to us if we put ourselves in full pursuit of money, sex or power. I'm pretty simple-minded. Everything relates back to these three things.

In order to prepare for an uncertain future, God renewed his covenant with the Israelites and reminds them of his covenant with them through a physical marking: Obedience. A principle that lifts from this passage: To prepare for an uncertain future remember the God who marks you and live in obedience to him. His promises give us rest even in an uncertain future.

**At that time the Lord said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again." So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth (verses 2-3).**

What is going on here? The Lord commanded Joshua to make flint knives, to circumcise, and Joshua was obedient to the Lord's commands. Physical circumcision had become a sign of God's covenant all the way back to Abraham. It was sign of belonging to God's community and a sign of divine promise from God. It was a necessary preparation for a ritual celebration about to happen called the Passover. Even though there were metal knives God directed them to use flint knives. God tied this act in Joshua 5 back to the original covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17. God is saying here, "Use the flint knives again."

What is flint? In the Bible flint is literally "a hard stone." It was often used for years after the development of metal knives for ritual purposes. He did this at a place called Gibeath Haaraloth, which literally means hill of foreskins. What was the reason for the circumcision after crossing the Jordan?

**Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not. The Israelites had moved about in the wilderness forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, since they had not obeyed the Lord. For the Lord had sworn to them that they would not see the land he had solemnly promised their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So he raised up their sons in their place, and these were the ones Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way.**

**And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed. Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt**

**from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day (verses 4-9).**

What was the reproach of Egypt? It was the disobedience of the previous generation who came out of Egypt and died in the desert. This present generation was under the same judgment, but through their obedience to the covenant by getting circumcised, this judgment was removed and they were permitted to inherit the Promised Land. While this generation rested in camp healing from their circumcision they no doubt reflected on how meaningful this preparation was for them.

They were reminded that they were marked forever by God. They were reminded that their flesh is weak and that their ancestors gave in to their flesh and were disobedient even though they were circumcised. They were reminded that their flesh was weak and if there was going to be victory God had to be strong.

They were reminded that there were things in their hearts that needed to be cut away, and if they were cut away, they would look more like children of the covenant. And they were reminded that when these things are cut away, it not only pleases God, it is desirable for us to find rest in uncertain times as well.

As Christians we can relate to all this. In Colossians 2:11-12 Paul describes a circumcision; not a physical circumcision but a spiritual circumcision. *"In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."*

Paul is saying that the moment we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we were immediately spiritually circumcised. A circumcision took place in our heart. We were marked permanently. We can be identified as part of a covenant community called the church. We show our identification with Christ and with his church through the symbol of being baptized. This circumcision doesn't literally cut flesh with a flint knife, but as we follow Christ in obedience he reveals pieces of our lives that are not holy and need to be cut out so we can be prepared for uncertain times and be useful to God in those times. And the awesome thing to remember is that this cutting is not just for his glory, it is also for our own well being, our joy as Christians.

Tim Keller answers the question, How do I know if I have a circumcised heart? "You have a circumcised heart when what you ought to do and what you want to do are the same – pleasure and duty are the same." Expect God to surface in you something he wants cut out of your life even today. Maybe it's a bad relationship. Maybe a character flaw or poor attitude deep inside. Something in you that doesn't jive with the mark that God put on you. Confess it. Turn from it. Ask God to cut it away. Ask God to fill you with his love and trust him to replace it with his peace.

Then go tell a trusted Christian friend about what God is doing in your life.

Not only do we prepare for uncertain times by remembering who has marked us, we also prepare by celebrating who saved you.

### **Prepare by Celebrating Who Saved You**

As they waited to take their Promised Land, they partook of the same Passover celebration that their parents and grandparents did 40 years earlier the night before they escaped from Egypt. Preparation continues by having them celebrate Passover. This Passover reflects God's grace. They didn't get the judgment they deserved. They saw they didn't earn their freedom from bondage, but that it came only because of God's grace to them. God had provided in their past, and he was going to provide in the future. It was God's goodness, God's grace pure and simple.

**On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after [they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan (verses 10-12).**

Everything was changed. The wilderness had passed and the Promised Land had come. Their food had changed. Their love/hate relationship with 40 years of manna was over. Now they had the bread and cereal of Canaan. This Passover meal with the produce in Canaan was a down payment of what they would eventually have in abundance as they put down roots in their new land.

Just imagine, for the first time they were eating produce from the land. Imagine going away and missing your favorite restaurant. I remember the first years we lived in the Midwest we suffered because we didn't have good Mexican food in our community. Whenever we flew back to California, our first priority—in fact on the way home from the airport—was to stop at Baja Fresh to eat. Some of you might not agree with my choice for good Mexican food, but you have to remember we were in the desert as far as Mexican food was concerned and Orange County was the promised land. We stopped for Baja Fresh before we saw our family!

As the Passover served as a reminder of escape from Egypt, here the Passover served as a reminder of their entrance into the Promised Land. The crossing of the Jordan and the ending of manna and the beginning of new life took place at this Passover celebration.

There is tremendous symbolism in these verses. Jesus celebrated his last Passover on earth with his disciples at the Last Supper the night before he was crucified. It was clear: Jesus was the Lamb of God who was slain for our sins. It was his blood that was placed over the doorposts of our heart, so the judgment due us, the

guilt and shame that trapped us, was removed from us and was placed on Jesus Christ on the cross. And God's wrath passed over us and fell on God's perfect Son Jesus. He died, was buried, and on the third day he rose again.

For the Christian, the Easter celebration of the resurrection of Christ marks the new Passover event. On Easter we celebrate the new life we have been given in a new promised land with Christ. And we celebrate this entering into the new promised land every week together in worship. All of this points to undeserved favor, God's amazing grace. And amazing grace to us required a death of an innocent man.

How does the grace displayed at Passover help prepare us for victory? As we consider how we prepare for victory in uncertain times, we need to be reminded of the certainty of God's love, his goodness, and that we don't deserve any good thing. For us to prepare for battle, we need to know that we are not entitled. Every victory is undeserved. If we want to honor Christ in a post-Christian world, it will be because we don't ever see ourselves as better than anyone else, that only by the grace of God do we ever experience any victories.

If we want to honor Christ in our culture where Christ is ignored or misunderstood or stereotyped poorly, we need to be like Christ; more humble, more loving and more other-centered than those who ignore or misunderstand Christ. Being like Christ is our best witness for Christ. People examine and judge us by how we handle the uncertainties of life. Are we thankful? Can we be disciplined to remember and celebrate the goodness of God in the uncertainties of life?

So not only do we prepare for victory in uncertain times by remembering who marked us, and by celebrating who saved us, we also prepare for spiritual victory in uncertain times by relying on who is leading us.

### **Prepare by Relying on Who is Leading You**

Here they are on the west side of the Jordan, reflecting on all that has happened—still sore as they rest and heal, eating real food from the ground, a ground that will produce for them milk and honey; basking in God's undeserved favor, realizing on their own they can't win the battle, and therefore thanking a holy God that he made all this possible because of a Passover lamb. This generous God who has marked them and been good to them is now about to assure them that as they are about to advance on Jericho, he will lead them in the most unorthodox battle strategy in the history of warfare.

The idea that comes to me when I read verses 13-15 is empowered for spiritual victory, empowered by God's presence and help when engaged in a battle to engage our post Christian culture, to bring love, healing, truth and reconciliation to those who need a touch from God.

**Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come" (verses 13-14a).**

Notice he doesn't answer Joshua's specific question. Instead he identifies that he is the commander of the army of the Lord, or literally the King; that what mattered was that he was on God's side. God's will would prevail no matter what. He was not there to take over the army of Israel from Joshua. He was there to lead the heavenly army into battle. The commander of the Lord's Army was meeting with the commander of Israel's army. Most scholars believe that this angel-type figure was actually Jesus Christ pre-incarnate, the same person who met Moses in the bush and who wrestled with Jacob.

In the battles of the Christian life Jesus is the ultimate authority, the ultimate commander. He is the leader we must follow. He was there on the battlefield with Joshua, he was there with the people of Israel, and he will be here for us when we go into battle. I know some of you are facing discouragement, distress, doubt and have felt the sting of defeat. You see battles ahead that you can't win. With Christ we will win if we follow him.

For Joshua, a man schooled in the art of war, this soldier was not something that fit his framework. For us there is a lesson. Following Christ is not our knee jerk response to the uncertainties we face. Following Christ is not how we are taught to fight battles. But look at what the commander of the Army of Israel did to prepare for the battle ahead. This gives us insight into who Joshua thought that commander was. He worshipped him.

**Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so (verses 14b-15).**

Look at Joshua's response. He fell down on his face in worship. The God who appeared to his mentor Moses now appeared to him. Joshua was facing a battle and he surrendered to God. Have you been facing battles and you have been unwilling to

surrender to God? Have you been trying to prepare for victory and have forgotten that followers of Christ surrender? Have you wondered how surrender worked out for Joshua? Just read chapter 6.

Bruce Larson tells how he helped people struggling to surrender as Joshua surrendered that day before entering Jericho. "For many years I worked in New York City and counseled at my office any number of people who were wrestling with this yes-or-no decision. Often I would suggest they walk with me from my office down to the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas, a beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. There he is the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden. 'Now that's one way to live,' I would point out to my companion, 'trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me'.

"On the other side of Fifth Avenue is Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and there behind the high altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand. My point was illustrated graphically. 'We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, "I give up, Lord; here is my life. I give you my world. The whole world. We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, "I give up, Lord; here's my life. I give you my world, the whole world.'"

Why do we need Joshua 5 this morning? As the most highlighted passage in all of Kindle says, "Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them."

The battles we face cannot be won through conventional fighting. It doesn't matter how prepared for battle the world says you are. If we are not marked by Christ and desire obedience to him, and if we are not able to celebrate and rest and heal in the reality that Christ saved us by his grace, and if we are not willing to surrender to his leadership and be empowered by him, we are not preparing for victory over the certain uncertainties in our future.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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