

Guilt and Freedom

by David H. Roper

When I was a kid we used to gather around the radio on Saturday mornings. We had one of those radios that looked like a bee hive, and across the front was emblazoned, "Super Heterodyne." To this day I do not know what that term means, but it always impressed me! Listening to "The Lone Ranger" was the big event on Saturday morning. The announcer would always say, "Return with us now to the exciting days of yesteryear. From out of the past come the thundering hoof beats of the great horse Silver. The Lone Ranger rides again!" I am sure that some of you can recall those exciting episodes. I thought of this as I was studying the book of Joshua in preparation for this message, because, basically, this is what we are doing. We are going back and reliving the exciting days of yesteryear. As parents we want to walk through the land of Canaan with our children and, as we see certain monuments and geographical features, to recall the events which occurred there, and to use these as opportunities to teach our children.

In our last study, we read and commented on chapter 4, the story of the crossing of the river Jordan, and the monuments which were erected to commemorate this great event the miraculous rolling back of the water in order for the children of Israel to enter the Land and the truths which are found in this particular event.

Now we want to look at two more events the circumcision of the nation of Israel at Gilgal, and the conversion of a Canaanite harlot at Jericho. Both of these are described in the book of Joshua as monumental events. They exist as opportunities to teach by means of monuments. One was the name of a place, Gilgal, where the nation of Israel was circumcised. The second is the person herself, Rahab, who is a monument to the grace of God.

Turn with me to chapter 5 of Joshua, and let us look at this account of the circumcision of the nation Israel. It seems very significant to me that the conquest of Canaan should have begun with pain. Before Israel could draw the sword on their enemies, they had to draw the knife on themselves in the reinstatement of circumcision. The nation that came out of Egypt had observed this rite; the entire male population had been circumcised. But during the years they wandered in the wilderness the practice was forsaken. We know from the prophetic books that they worshiped the stars, and became idolatrous, and forgot the covenant they had with the Lord. The rite of circumcision, which was the sign, or seal, of that covenant, was neglected. Now they are enjoined to reinstate it.

Now it came about when all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard how the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the sons of Israel until they had crossed, that their hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them any longer, because of the sons of Israel.

In the margin of the New American Standard Bible you will notice that there is a footnote to the pronoun "they" which indicates that it can be translated "we." This is an indication that this particular section of Joshua--at least chapter 5--is an eyewitness report, which makes it much more vivid and graphic. This is the report of one who was there, who saw these incidents and actually participated.

At that time the Lord said to Joshua, "Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time." So Joshua made himself flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth [the hill of the foreskins]. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness along the way, after they came out of Egypt. For all the people who came out were circumcised, but all the people who were born in the wilderness along the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the sons of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, that is, the men of war who came out of Egypt,

perished because they did not listen to the voice of the Lord, to whom the Lord had sworn that He would not let them see the land which the Lord had sworn to their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. And their children whom lie raised up in their place, Joshua circumcised them along the way. Now it came about when they had finished circumcising all the nation, that they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach [or "the disgrace," or "the shame"] of Egypt from you. "So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

Let me say as an aside -- it does not relate specifically to what I want to say in a moment--that the younger generation had to wait in the wilderness to go into the Land because of the sins of their fathers. It always strikes me when I read this passage that this could have occasioned a great deal of resentment on their part. An entire generation those from twenty years of age on down were delayed in their entrance into the Land through no fault of their own. Their parents had been afraid that if they took them into the Land, their children would be destroyed. At least, this was the rationale they posed. The irony is that they were the ones who perished because of unbelief. It was their children who came into the Land. God had guaranteed that he would take care of their children, which is reassuring to those of us who are parents! But the parents, because of their own unbelief, caused the delay. And yet there is no indication that these children were ever bitter or resentful toward their parents.

It occurs to me that some of us may have directed bitterness or resentment against our parents because of some wrong they have done us which has caused us struggle and difficulty and delay in our spiritual life. But please remember this: God is committed to getting us into the Land, into the fullness of blessing in Christ. Nothing our parents have done, or can do, will ultimately frustrate that purpose. So our response to our parents should not be one of bitterness but of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Because God did get these children into the Land.

Now they are faced with this circumcision, which must take place before they can go on to conquer the enemy nations in the Land. The passage indicates that there was something especially significant about this particular day. "Today," God says, "I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." If you take the time to determine the chronology of this period, you discover that it was exactly forty years to the day after they had come out of Egypt. So the forty years of wandering in the wilderness were over.

And this rite was reinstated as a sign of the unique relationship that every Israelite bore to his Lord. It was a private and personal sign. It was not the sort of thing one could observe, any more than I can look at you and see which ones of you belong to Jesus Christ and which do not. God did not stamp the sign on the foreheads of his people; it was something which was private and personal and intimate, something which was real. And the Jews knew that it signified far more than some mere hygienic measure. It was more than a physical act; it was a spiritual act. It symbolized something real. Moses had said prior to this event, in two of his great messages delivered in the plains of Moab, that they must be circumcised in heart as well as in body. So the Jews knew that this was an inner, secret sign, a personal sign, a sign of ownership. God, as it were, put his stamp of ownership, his seal, on each circumcised individual: "This person belongs to me."

We know from the New Testament that circumcision also signifies the putting off of the flesh, the cutting off of the old life, with its power of condemnation over us. The guilt and shame and disgrace and embarrassment of our past are gone; they have been cut off. The past no longer can affect us, it cannot control us, its power is broken. The passage through the Jordan signifies the fact of our identification with Christ--our being placed into his death, burial, and resurrection. Circumcision symbolizes the effects of that identification the cutting off of the old life, and the placement into a new kind of relationship.

Therefore the event, and the place where this event took place, are very important. They called the place Gilgal, "rolling away," because it was there that God "rolled away" the reproach of Egypt. And whenever a Jewish family passed by that place, and their attention was called to the fact that this place was called "Gilgal," it is such a strange and colorful name that the children would ask, "Why is this place called 'Gilgal'?" And the Jewish father and mother could explain to the children that this was the place where the shame and the indignity and the indecency of Egypt was rolled away, and they were given again the sign of their relationship with God. They had both the experience, and the daily reckoning upon that experience--the daily cutting off of the flesh, the old life--from which

they could teach.

When we do this, our children learn. I am sure that the day you pay the bills can be a traumatic period around your house. In some cases, the 1st and the 15th are, without question, the most difficult days of the month. They may be the times when Pop goes up in smoke, when he gets after everybody for spending too much money. Nothing much is said between the 2nd and the 14th. But suddenly on the 15th, like Old Faithful, Pop blows his stack. And he does so, of course, out of fear. As the bills get higher, the balance gets lower, and he gets nervous. But right then is an opportunity that each of us has--at least twice a month--to cut off the flesh. Those events can be "Gilgals" in our experience. What do our children learn about God's ability to provide on the 1st and 15th of the month? Does it all depend on us, or is God the One who is adequate to meet our needs? How do we handle that anxiety? By cutting off the flesh? By saying "No" to the fear and frustration and anger that may conic at that time'?

It is a time when we can get our children together and earnestly begin to pray and think through the needs of our family, and determine what, under God's instruction, would be a responsible pattern for us to pursue as a family. We can handle that situation with confidence in God instead of with anxiety. That is a "Gilgal." That is a place where the shame of the past can be rolled away, and we can deal in faith with the need that lies before us. All of us face this sort of situation. In fact, there may be "Gilgals" every day, and these become opportunities to cut off the old passions of the flesh, and to trust God. And our children can learn not only by our example, but by the teaching they receive. For that is a monument which ought to be in our life.

Then the nation moved on to the next step in the program, which was the conquest of Jericho. Gilgal was only a couple of miles from Jericho, about a half-hour's walk. Behind Jericho, there is a large escarpment, a barrier to the central highlands of Palestine. It is split by gorges, and the only way anyone could get into the highlands was through these gorges. Jericho was located so that it was impossible to get through these passes without passing the city. This is why it was located there. For centuries this city had been there guarding the eastern entrance to Canaan. All the marauding nomads from the east had to confront it. It was a heavily fortified city, one of a number of fortified city-states which stretched up and down the land of Canaan.

We have to remember that the Jews had not seen many fortified cities--if any at all. This may have been their first confrontation with a city like this, and it was a very imposing, impressive sight. At the time, Jericho was probably seven or eight acres in area, and was very like a Greek acropolis--a walled city at the center, with suburbs around it. So there were smaller hamlets, houses, and farms spreading throughout the countryside, and at the center was Jericho. This was the place where everyone fled when they were under siege, and they had built the city to withstand sieges. Jericho may be the oldest city that we know anything about. Archaeologists who have been excavating Jericho say that there may have been as many as seventeen sieges in the years preceding the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites. Here was this imposing city, with its double walls, and with steep-sloping ramps at the base of the walls which made them virtually impossible to breach. The passage tells us that, one night before the conquest, Joshua went out to survey the scene, chapter 5, verse 13:

Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho [The Hebrew text actually says in Jericho, so he must have been in the suburbs, right outside the wall.] **that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?"**

It must have been a very frightening scene. Joshua was walking through the deserted streets, when suddenly a man appeared with a drawn sword. I am sure Joshua drew his own sword, and challenged the man, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" Notice the response of the man: "No," he said. That is, "I haven't come to take sides; I've come to take over. I've come to lead this expedition." The passage goes on to tell us that this was the Lord himself, the pre-incarnate Christ--the Angel of Yahweh, he is called in the Old Testament--the Commander-in-Chief of the Israelite forces. He supplies the information that Joshua needs to carry out the conquest of the city. We pick up the account in chapter 6:

Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in. [The city was buttoned up; everyone was inside, safe and secure. Notice what the Lord says next:] **And the**

Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand...[Joshua looks at this great city with its imposing walls, tightly sealed. The Angel of the Lord says, "See, it's yours!"] And you shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And it shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead."

That is not normally the way you conquer a walled city! Now, that is the perspective the Jews had--from the outside looking in. But I want to tell you about another perspective. There was a young woman inside the city looking out, and her name was Rahab. She was a "liberated woman." I say that on good authority, because that is what her name means. The Canaanite language which was spoken at that time, and the Hebrew language, were very similar--much as Italian and Spanish are related. Both were Semitic languages, and many of the terms were interchangeable. In some places they could even understand each other. Her name, Ra-hab, in the Canaanite dialect, means "someone in an open place, a broad place." It was used later in Jewish literature to refer to the great, open plaza in the center of town. It is used in the Psalms when David makes statements such as, "The Lord has led me out into a broad place." Rahab considered herself to be one who was out in the open, one who was free. She was a harlot, the passage tells us. The old Jewish commentators have tried to soften this. The Hebrew word for harlot also means "to feed". They have tried to make her out to be a woman who kept a boarding house. But unfortunately, you cannot do that. She was a harlot. The New Testament calls her that; there is no question about the term there. She was a prostitute.

Some of our social commentators today would say that the Canaanites were sexually "enlightened." It is to our advantage that we have available a tremendous amount of information about Canaanite life in the Fifteenth Century B.C. We know exactly what their religion was like, and what their social life was like. Archaeologists have found entire libraries of that day. We know in fact that they were totally hung up on sex. It was their life, was what they lived for. Their art was pornographic. Little figurines have been found all over Palestine, dating from this period, which were explicitly sexual. I can imagine what it must have been like to go to the Seven-Eleven store in Jericho to pick up some yogurt, and here would have been these little figurines set up all over the counter--like the magazines you have to face today when you go in to buy a coke! It was all over the place. The ballads they sang, and their religious worship, all centered around sex. The literature of this time was some of the most frankly explicit sexual literature you will ever run across.

Rahab lived right in the middle of all this; she was part of it. She was probably a temple prostitute. Canaanites of this period called their prostitutes "Kodshu", the same term that is found in the Old Testament for "holy"--"kodesh". These were holy people; they were worshiped. This was the Canaanites' view of sexual things, and this was the way Rahab lived--"free", "liberated"--but miserable. She had discovered the awful truth that often we do things because we are "free" to do them, but then after awhile we must do them; we have no other recourse.

We know she was miserable, because chapter 2 tells us she was. It is interesting that, of all the people in Jericho, the spies should have come to Rahab's house. Why did they? Because she had a heart that was open. God knew her heart. God never passes over anyone whose heart is open and sensitive to spiritual things. The book of Hebrews tells us that she was the only believer in that entire city. She wanted to know God. And when the spies showed up at her house, she said, "I know that the Lord is God." We do not know where she got that information. She had only heard of the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan, but she knew that the Lord was God, and she wanted further truth. The striking thing about this whole passage in chapter 6 is that the spies, in verse 25 and in no other place in Scripture, are called "messengers," because they came not merely to spy out the land but to be messengers of the good news. They found a heart that was open, and they told her about the Lord, and she responded.

You know the story--how the spies slipped in at night, perhaps dressed like Amorites, and made for her house. Perhaps, in their thinking, that would be the place they would be least likely to be spotted. In God's thinking, he directed them to a woman whose heart was open, and they found a responsive spirit. She hid them, and lied to

protect them. Her house was located right on the wall, so she was in a good place to protect them and later to effect their escape. They fled into the mountains and thus escaped back to Israel. Before they left they promised that they would spare her house.

So during the time that Israel was at Gilgal, preparing to march, she gathered all her family into her house. I am sure she had a terrible time keeping them all there. But she had been told that all who were in her house would be spared, and so she waited for the Jews to come. Finally the day came when they marched out of Gilgal, and she could see them making their way up the long, alluvial slope from Gilgal to Jericho. And she thought, "This is the day! This is the day of my deliverance!" And they started to march around the city. The armed men in front, and then the priests blowing the long rams' horns, the Ark of the Covenant placed behind them, and more armed men behind. They went completely around the city--it must have taken about an hour and a half--and then they marched back to Gilgal. She thought, "Well, perhaps they're just reconnoitering. Tomorrow is the day!"

The next day they marched from Gilgal and again went around the city blowing their horns, and nobody said a thing. I have seen illustrations of this scene in which the Jerichoites are hurling taunts down at the Jews from the walls. But I do not think they did, because this passage says they were terrified, waiting to see what would happen. There was absolute silence, for the Jews were not saying anything, either. They went around the city, and Rahab thought, "Tomorrow?" The third day they went around, and the fourth, and fifth. I am sure that by the fifth or sixth day Rahab was trying to explain to her relatives what in the world was going on! It was a little bit embarrassing, difficult to explain, being identified with a Lord like that. He does not always do things the way we would expect.

Finally, as you know, the seventh day came. They left Gilgal early in the morning and marched around the city seven times. On the seventh circuit they blew the horns and shouted their victory cry. They shouted in victory because they knew they were victorious even before they entered the city. It has always struck me as strange that Rahab's house was right on the wall--the text says so--and yet the wall fell down flat. I suspect that only Rahab's house remained standing. The Jews entered through the breached wall and conquered the city. Verses 20 through 23:

So the people shouted, and priests blew the trumpets; and it came about, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, that the people shouted with a great shout and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight ahead, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.

And Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the harlot's house and bring the woman and all she has out of there, as you have sworn to her." So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives, and placed them outside the camp of Israel. [The Hebrew text says they "gave them rest", caused them to rest outside the camp of Israel.] And they burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

I am sure that when Rahab came out of Jericho, she had all the marks of Canaanite religion about her. She was dressed and made up like a harlot; her language probably was coarse and vulgar. I am sure that none of those Israelites knew how to handle her. The text says there was a time when she rested outside the camp of Israel. But the very next statement about her is, "She has lived in the midst of Israel to this day." She was accepted right into the family, with all of her differences, with all of her background, with all of her coarseness. They took her right in, and loved her. Robert Frost says about the human family, "Home is where they have to take you in." And this is true of God's family. There are all sorts of people in God's family who really do not measure up to "our standards". But they measure up to God's standards! Because he sees them all on the basis of Christ's merit. He does not even see their past. Oh, it is true that she was always called a harlot. To the end of her days she is referred

to as "Rahab the harlot," not "Rahab the ex-harlot". Because you really cannot do away with the past. And that is what her past was. But it did not matter, it did not make any difference.

There is an intriguing sequel to this story. She married a man by the name of Salmon. Jewish tradition says that Salmon was one of the spies. Now, that makes a neat little love story. She married right into Israel. Do you know who her son was? Boaz--the Boaz who married Ruth. If you want a picture of sexual integrity, of a caring and a protective attitude toward women, it is Boaz. Where did he learn that? From his mother, Rahab the harlot. She not only received forgiveness for the past, but she was given a whole new kind of life. She was accepted, she was forgiven.

In Matthew 21, Jesus said of the Pharisees, who were certainly righteous from the standpoint of outward observance, and who thought they did everything right, "The harlots will get into the kingdom of heaven before you do." Because God knows the person who has a broken and contrite heart; he knows that heart. He saw Rahab's heart, saw her desire to be changed, to be different. And she was accepted into the family, and was loved. She dwelt in the midst of Israel, the text says, "to this day". And I am sure that wherever she went, she was always outstanding. Therefore children would point to her and say, "How did she get in here with us?" And the parents would tell the story of Rahab's acceptance into the family of God. She was forgiven, she was accepted.

Do you realize that about yourself? Do you realize that you have been accepted and forgiven, that your trespasses are not held against you? If Jesus Christ is your Lord, if you have entered into a relationship with him by faith, then you have been forgiven. The past has no claim over you. You cannot do anything about the past; it will always be there, but it does not make any difference. God loves you, he has accepted you.

That fact also has something to say about the way we accept one another. The mark of our understanding of our own forgiveness, of our appreciation of the measure of forgiveness we have received from the Father, is the measure of forgiveness we extend to others. Do we expect them to live up to our standards, to dress as we do, to behave according to our code, to have the same kind of past we have had? Or can we accept those with a checkered career, with a wasted life in the past? Can we accept them, love them, and include them in the family, simply because they are in the family? Have we learned this in our own homes? Have we swept out the old grudges, the old resentments, the old bitternesses that we hold toward one another--because we understand the measure of forgiveness we have received from the Lord? Paul says, "Be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you."

Father, we can identify so closely with folks like Rahab, since we too have a past that makes us ashamed, and perhaps have actions in the immediate past which shame us. And yet we thank you for Gilgal, and the cutting off of that old life, for the daily reminder that we belong to you, that we have entered into a new life, and the past is forgiven and forgotten. We ask that we might extend the same kind of forgiveness to those around us, loving them and forgiving them and accepting them even though they, like Rahab, are different, and even though we may sometimes dislike the things they do. May we as parents have the same attitude toward our children, and as children toward our parents--to accept them just as they are, because we are accepted in the Beloved One. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: Guilt and Freedom

By: David H. Roper

Series: Joshua

Scripture: Joshua 5, 6

Message No: 2 of 4

Catalog No:3442

Date: July 13, 1975