

Joshua

And
The Land of Promise

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE STONES OF GILGAL

(Joshua 4, 5)

“Less, less of self each day,
And more, my God, of thee!
Oh, keep me in the way,
However rough it be!
Leave naught that is unmeet;
Of all that is mine own
Strip me; and so complete
My training for the throne.”

- H. Bonar

ON the western side of Jordan, to which the host of Israel had now come, five miles from the river-brink, the terraced banks reached their highest point. That was Gilgal. There the first camp was pitched, on the edge of a vast grove of majestic palms, nearly three miles broad and eight miles long, that stretched away to Jericho.

Dean Stanley suggests that, as Joshua witnessed it, it must have recalled to him the magnificent palm-groves of Egypt, such as stretch at the present day along the shores of the Nile at Memphis. Amidst this forest could have been seen, reaching through its open spaces, fields of ripe corn, “**for it was the time of the barley harvest**”; and above the top most trees the high walls and towers of the city on the farther side, which from that grove derived its proud name, “**Jericho, the City of Palms.**”

Gilgal was the base of operations in the war against the people of Canaan.

There the camp remained, and the women and children (9:6; 10:6). It ranked with Mizpeh and Bethel amongst the holy places, where Samuel exercised his sacred office (I Samuel vii. 16). It was the rallying-point to which the people gathered at solemn times of national crisis (11:14). Saul had reason to remember it; and there Agag was hewed in pieces “**before the Lord.**”

Probably to the last of the events, and beyond, the twelve stones were visible which had been pitched by Joshua as the lasting memorial of the passage of the river. Children were brought thither by their parents to see them, and to hear the wondrous story of the passage, recited on the spot in words which Joshua had suggested long before.

At the time when the book was written, the other heap of stones, laid in the river-bed, must have been clearly discernible when the stream, temporarily swollen by the spring floods, had retreated to its normal width (4:9); and there could have been no difficulty in fixing the hill of circumcision, where, at the command of God, they had rolled away the reproach of Egypt, and from which the name Gilgal, or Rolling, was derived (5:9).

Gilgal was from the first “**holy**” ground (5:15); and as we traverse it again in devout thought, it will give us also themes for deep and holy meditation.

I. THE STONES ON THE BANK

At the divine bidding, twelve men, one out of each tribe, went down into the river’s bed on a special errand. From the place where the priests feet stood firm in Jordan they took each man a stone. It may be that the priests had selected those stones as providing a safe and secure footing; or perhaps they lay within some short distance of the spot where they had stood upbearing the sacred symbol of the presence of God. For centuries these stones had lain there undisturbed; but now, piled together in a heap before the eyes of all men, they were to be a memorial of the passage of Jordan, as the song of Moses was of the passage through the Red Sea.

It is well that forgetful hearts like ours should be stirred up by way of remembrance. We are so apt to grow unmindful of the Rock that begat us, and to forget the God that gave us birth. Even the Lord, whose love effected a redemption which runs parallel with our lives, as a river beside a carnage road, needed to set up a memorial of his most precious death on our behalf. There is, therefore, a needs-be for these memorial stones to be erected beside our Jordans, with their inscription, “**Wherefore remember.**”

The special circumstance which these stones commemorated was that they had come, a united people, through the Jordan; and that as a nation they had been brought into the land promised to their fathers.

What though two tribes and a half had elected to stay with their cattle in the rich pastures of Gilead and Bashan, yet they were still an integral part of the people. There were twelve stones. And in after-centuries, if the heap remained intact, even after the northern tribes had been carried into captivity, any who came thither would be compelled to admit that there had been a time when the twelve tribes of Israel had stood together, on that spot, a united and mighty nation.

And what is the typical and spiritual significance of this? Why this reverent care to pitch these boulder stones, and to record with such minute detail the fact? What mean these stones? Those who have followed carefully the teaching of the preceding chapters cannot hesitate as to the reply.

As in the passage of the Jordan all Israel came up on to the river's bank, so in the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus the whole Church of his redeemed passed over to resurrection ground, and are, in the purpose and thought of God, already seated in heavenly places.

There can be no doubt that this is the teaching of the Holy Ghost through the apostles. It comes out unmistakably in the writings of Peter as well as of Paul. No fact is better attested or more eagerly emphasized. To ignore it is to miss the foundation on which the structure of a full and present salvation is based. We must go back to the cross for the Atonement; but we must also go back to it for our passage in him to the resurrection side of death:

“In him we died, in him we rose,
In him we triumphed o'er our foes;
In him in Heaven we took our seat,
And Heaven rejoiced o'er earth's defeat.”

Addressing those who at the time when the Lord Jesus was dying on the cross were probably living in the lusts of their flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, the Apostle says: **“Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus”** (Ephesians 2:5-6).

And in each case the use of the aorist tense points to a definite past act by which their position, and that of the whole Church, was settled, once and for all, so far, at least, as the purpose and thought of God are concerned.

It cannot be too often or too clearly emphasized that the basic thought in the New Testament philosophy of deliverance from the power of sin consists in the intelligent apprehension of this divine fact that the whole Church was identified with Jesus in his death, and resurrection, and ascension; that all died with him; all lay in his grave; all rose with him on the Resurrection morning; all passed with him, in the divine intention, to the throne.

It was no lonely figure that, as the light of morning broke on the temple dome, climbed the steeps of the sky, drawn by an invisible attraction; He was accompanied by a multitude which no man could have numbered; in Him you and I and all believers trod down the principalities and powers of darkness, and took our place above them all. What though as yet for many of us this seems a dream? Yet let us never rest till the Spirit of God has made it a living fact. And let it be the one aim of our life by faith to make that true in daily life and experience which is true in the thought and purpose of our God.

Consider those twelve stones on the farther side of Jordan; and be sure that as they represented the entire people, and commemorated their marvelous transportation from the one side of Jordan to the other, so, in the New Jerusalem, the twelve foundation-stones bearing the names of the apostles, and the twelve gates inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, are a standing memorial that the Church as a whole is on resurrection ground; but her shame and sorrow are that she has not availed herself of her lofty privileges, or descended to earth as girded with the power of the risen, living Jesus.

We have crossed the River. Our eternity is begun. Part possession of our heritage has already been bestowed. In Jesus we are loved and accepted; we are more than conquerors; we occupy a position which, if only we keep it, is unassailable by our foes; they can only prevail against us when they succeed in tempting us to abandon it. All things are ours in union with our raised and reigning Lord; whether the world, or life, or death, or things present or things to come all are ours, and we are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

IT. THE STONES IN THE BED OF THE STREAM

Not content with pitching a cairn of stones on the river's bank, Joshua, at God's command, set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests that bare the ark of the covenant stood. And often, as he came back and back to Gilgal, he must have gone out by himself to walk and muse beside the river, turning the outward and the inner gaze to the spot where beneath the flow of the current those stones lay hidden.

They were the lasting memorial of the miracle which otherwise might have faded from memory, or seemed incredible. They were aids to faith. Where they lay the people had been, and the feet of the priests had been planted dry. And surely the power that had arrested the Jordan, and brought the people up from its bed, would not fail until it had wrought out the whole purpose of God.

We too may often walk along that river, and gaze into those depths.

There Jesus lay in death for us, and there we lay in him; and not we only, but all his Church. **"For if one died for all, then all died."** Each time we partake of the Lord's Supper, or behold the rite of baptism administered in the form of immersion, or fall into the ground to die in acts of self-sacrifice and self-dying, we stand with Joshua beside the Jordan, covering the twelve memorial stones; and there float through our thought, like a strain of thrilling music, the words, **"Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth, . . . that he might fill all things."**

Nothing breaks the power of sin like this. When we apprehend the love of Christ, and the meaning of His death, we are constrained to live, no longer to ourselves, but to Him. By his cross we too have been crucified to the world, and the world to us. Other men may be fascinated by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; but these things have lost their charm for us. How can we love them when we remember what they did unto our Lord our life, our love, the bridegroom and husband of our souls? What true woman can dally with the murderer of her spouse? Go, O Christian soul, and meditate long and prayerfully on this great spiritual fact.

- Realize that thou hast passed into another sphere.
- Thou art quit of thy first husband, the Law; and thou art married to another, even to Him who was raised from the dead.
- Thou sharest his life, his home, his protection.
- That principle of sin that held thee fast in the lower sphere may not follow thee hither. Death bars its way.

Reckon, then, thyself to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus; and answer every solicitation of the world, the flesh, the devil, by affirming that thou art none of theirs.

Let us also remember that the very same power, “**the working of his mighty power,**” which availed to raise Christ, our representative and head, from the grave, and to set him far above all orders of spiritual being at his own right hand, is available for each of us who believe. Electricity lay hidden around men in these long ages in which they were oblivious to its presence and unable to apply it to their needs; and God’s mighty resurrection energy lies all around us, waiting for us to avail ourselves of it. Let us claim and appropriate and use it, yielding ourselves to its impulses, and learning that there is nothing in the purpose of God which he is not prepared to realize in the happy experience of those who believe.

III. THE RITE OF CIRCUMCISION

Israel looked for nothing less than to be led from the river-brink to the conquest and partition of the land. They suddenly discovered, however, that this was not quite the divine program for them. But they were required to submit to a painful rite, the seal of the covenant which was made originally to Abraham, and by virtue of which the land had been given to him and to his seed (Genesis 17:8-10).

During the wanderings of the desert which were due to their unbelief, and practically disinherited them the observance of this rite had been in abeyance; because the operation of the covenant was for the time in suspense. But now that the new young nation was learning to exercise its faith, the covenant and its seal came again into operation. “**and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time.**”

Even those comparatively unenlightened people must have realized that there was deep spiritual significance in the administration of that rite at that juncture. On more than one occasion they had heard Moses speak of circumcising the heart; and they must have felt that God meant to teach them the vanity of trusting to their numbers, or prowess, or martial array. Their strength was nothing to Him. The land was not to be won by their might, but to be taken from his hand as a gift. Self and the energy of the flesh must be set aside, that the glory of coining victory might be of God, and not of man. We, too, must have our Gilgal. It is not enough to acknowledge as a general principle that we are dead and risen with Christ; we must apply it to our inner and outer life.

- If we died with Christ, we must mortify our members, which are upon the earth.
- If we put away the old man with his doings, in our profession, we must also put away anger, wrath, malice, railing, and shameful speaking.
- If we were raised together with Christ, we must seek those things which are above, where Christ is seated on the right hand of God.

The first effect of our appreciation of the meaning of Christ’s death will be our application of that death to our members which are upon the earth. We have no warrant to say that sin is dead, or that the principle of sin is eradicated; but that we are dead to it in our standing, and are dead to it also in the reckoning of faith.

But for this we need the gift of the Blessed Spirit, in his Pentecostal fullness. It was by the Eternal Spirit that our Lord offered himself in death upon the cross; and it is by him alone that we can mortify the deeds of the body. For, first, the spirit of self is so subtle. It is like a taint in the blood, which, stayed in one place, breaks out in another. Protean in its shapes and ubiquitous in its hiding-places, it requires omniscience to discover and omnipresence to expel. And, secondly, only the Spirit of God has cords strong enough to bind us to the altar of death; to remind us in the hour of temptation; to enable us to look to Jesus for his grace; to inspire us with the passion of self-immolation; to keep us true and steady to the resolves of our holiest moments; to apply the withering fire of the Cross of Jesus to the growth of our self-conceit and self-energy for all these the grace of the Spirit is indispensable. He is the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, therefore he must be the Spirit of death to all that pertains to the old Adam.

There is a sense in which all believers have been circumcised in Christ; but there is another sense in which it is needful for them to pass one after another through the circumcision of Christ which is not made with hands, and which consists in the putting off of the body of the flesh. To that all who would lead a life of victory and inherit the Land of Promise must submit. The process may be sharp, for the knife does not spare pain. But it is in the hands of Jesus, the Lover of souls. Oh, shrink not from it! Let him do all that he deems needful, though it takes many days ere the wound is healed.

At first it might appear strange that the past experience of resurrection life should lead to death. But on further reflection it is not hard to see that all which is of the flesh must be condemned and executed even as He was, who came in the likeness of sinful flesh, that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who walked not after the flesh but after the Spirit. And though it might appear that the circumcised life will ever be a maimed life, it is not really so; the contrary is the universal testimony of this book. When the hand is cut off, we go maimed into life. When we mortify the deeds of the body, we begin to live. When the Lord our God has circumcised our hearts, then we love him with all our heart and with all our soul and we live.

You can never take Jericho, Christian worker, till you have been circumcised, till God has taken away your self-reliance, and has brought you down into the dust of death; then, when the sentence of death is in yourself, you will begin to experience the energy of the divine life, the glory of the divine victory.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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