

Joshua 4:19 - 5:12

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[0 : 0 0] Turn to Joshua chapter 4 verse 19 to chapter 5 verse 12. As I said earlier, I believe that this passage at its very heart has at the center the issue poses to us the question of identity.

We all know that it's something that is almost a cliché, but the thing about clichés is that they're true. We tend to ask ourselves at some point in our lives, why am I here? Who am I?

And these questions have at their heart a desire for identity and a sense of purpose. To a greater or lesser extent, perhaps not phrased in this exact way, but these questions of who am I, why am I here are questions that everyone at some point in their life asks. But our passage this evening challenges us and proves to us, grants us an opportunity, if you like, to understand that these questions, who am I, why am I here? These questions are questions that not only do we as human beings ask ourselves, ask ourselves, ask ourselves. But the questions that the Lord God Almighty, the one true God who created us, who asks and impresses upon us indeed for us to consider, to carefully consider, consider. So if this morning's passage in Hebrews 1 to chapter 2 verse 4 was about God speaking, then perhaps we could suggest that this evening's passage challenges us to consider whether we have heard God speaking and, if indeed we have, how we have responded. For God's covenant people, for Israel, here in context, one would think that the answer to the who am I question, why am I here question, well that should be obvious, isn't it? And yet the new generation of the Lord's chosen people, having just miraculously crossed the Jordan River, with a bridgehead now in the promised land, finally after all these years of wilderness wandering, well this new generation is forced to consider, perhaps to reconsider, just who they are and why they are where they are.

The same is true for every new generation of the Lord's people, perhaps particularly in Presbyterianism, in what we rejoice in the truth of the Lord's covenant community. We need to remind ourselves of the necessity of a personal consideration of and response to the truths of Scripture. It has been well said that God has no grandchildren. We may rightfully rejoice in generations of blessing by God in a particular family to which we also belong, but this does not absolve us personally of careful, prayerful consideration as to whether we have personally responded to God. About this we said a little this morning, it's no good to rely on mum and dad, granny and granddad, aunts and uncles who are the good and the great of the free church, whether that be here in

Bon Accord or in other congregations, Lewis and Sky, don't you know? We need to personally consider, have we responded, have I responded to the Lord's saving grace, to his communication? One might argue that our passage, particularly chapter 5 this evening, is something of a commentary on how the Lord's people here, the Lord's people even for us today, may remember and reflect and respond to what the 12 stone monument that God called Joshua to erect really commemorates. The miraculous power of the one true mighty God exercised on his people's behalf here, the crossing of the River Jordan on dry ground.

[4 : 18] Through this physical monument, the Lord reminds Joshua and the Israelites of his twofold purpose in choosing them, in saving them, in delivering them, firstly, that the Lord, in having acted on behalf of his people, that all peoples of the earth might know, this is chapter 4, verse 24, that all peoples on the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is mighty. There's an evangelistic purpose here, not just for the Jews, but for all the other nations. One of the key verses for our understanding and how the Lord in his providence and his sovereignty uses the Jews, relates to the Jews as Exodus 19, verse 6. You will be for me a people, a priesthood, a nation belonging to me, and we find the equivalent of that, as we'll see shortly in 1 Peter, where we're also called to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Why? So that we can declare the praises of God, who God is, what God has done to people round about us who yet do not know him. Here the monument, when the children and the next generation ask, what do these 12 stones mean? Then the Israelites are to respond to the next generation. Well, this is so all the peoples on the earth, firstly, might know that the hand of the Lord is mighty. Remember, what we're to commemorate is that the Lord dried up miraculously the River Jordan so that we could cross and enter into the promised land and begin to encamp on the plains of Jericho, looking at this mighty city before us. But secondly, there's a particular purpose in commemorating this act in the Lord choosing and preserving and saving and delivering His people for the Lord's people, that as His people, their identity may be confirmed, as we read, by always fearing, and sometimes we misunderstand that. I think it's helpful to say honoring, respecting.

We are to remember, we said a little of this this morning in terms of who Jesus is, we are to remember just who God is. I remember that many moons ago at a scripture union camp, that one of the leaders said to us as young people, we needed to remember that God was almighty and not all matey. And I think that's helpful. It's a helpful distinction. As we said in our prayer this morning, God is indeed the friend of sinners. We do relate to God. He wants to relate to us.

But there's a way in which we are to do that. We're not to be flippant. We're to remember that God is almighty. Hear God's people then, for us as God's people this evening, we are to always fear to honor the Lord God as our God. Again, chapter 4, verse 24. We may see, therefore, three essentially linked truths in our passage. Firstly, the acts of the mighty God on behalf of his people. At the very least, the very least here, the Lord's drying up of the River Jordan in order that his people could cross into the Promised Land. Secondly, and this is more where chapter 5 picks up, secondly, the people's response of faithful and obedient loyalty. The people's response to the mighty acts of God on their behalf of faithful, obedient loyalty. And thirdly, where these two things come together, the testimony that both the Lord's actions and the Lord's people in their faithful, obedient loyalty, the testimony that both the Lord's actions and the Lord's people are to the presence and the power of

God to the surrounding nations. We may hence begin to understand that the very identity of the Lord's people as indeed the Lord's people, the people on whose behalf the Lord God acts to rescue, deliver, provide for, serves an evangelistic purpose. Other people are to see, oh, hang on a minute, what's going on with these folk? And in some ways they seem to be, they may not use the word blessed, but that's how we would term it and understand it. Something's going on for these people. They may not be, they may not ignore or not undergo tough times, difficult times, trying times, but the way that they bear up under these, their confidence in this God who is with them and for them, that I find is a distinct challenge to me. That even in the tough times, there's something about them that, well, do you know what? I want to be part of them. I want to have that too during my tough times and difficult times. I want to have that relationship with the

[9 : 23] God that they proclaim. I want to understand what God's word is about and who this Jesus is and what the cross is about, what's Easter Sunday about and so on and so forth. That when people round about us who yet do not know the Lord, see the Lord working in our lives, working on behalf of us, when perhaps they begin to recognize just a little bit of who God is and that you and I are worth Jesus and that they're worth Jesus going to the cross, then they begin to sit up and take notice.

The peoples, the nations round about us are, as it were, to observe the mighty acts of God on behalf of we, His people, and to respond accordingly. Perhaps to say something like this, these are the people who are the very apple of God's eye. Look at the care that this God lavishes upon them, the power He exercises on their behalf. What an awesome God. I wonder if, and if I can, how I can, we'll come to know Him too.

As we said earlier in his first epistle, assists us in understanding that this truth continues in its application to God's covenant community today, so that's you and that's me, as much as it did to Israel of old. The supreme work of God in rescuing and delivering and providing for people like us, objects of His just and holy wrath, because we all fall so far short of His eternal standards of holiness and glory. And our thoughts, our words, our deeds, our very natures, testifies to the person and the power of God. Such salvation is to be found uniquely, supremely, only in and through God's Son, Jesus Christ, the one, as we said this morning, who took our penalty, died our death on Calvary's cross. The Holy Spirit-enabled response of those who, in faith, personally appropriate, respond to all that God is and all that God has done. In their faithful, continuing, obedient loyalty to God, not only as Saviour, but as Lord, well, this also serves as testimony to who God is, to the presence and power of God, to the lost. Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes the following words, in 1 Peter chapter 2, and this is verses 4 and 5, and then on to verses 9 to 12. Peter writes this, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and this is for us too. As you come to Him, excuse me, Jesus, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. You are a chosen race, you are a royal priesthood, you are a holy nation, a people for God's own possession. Why?

So that you, so that we may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. How do we do that? How do we go on to live? Well, Peter tells us, keep your conduct among the Gentiles or unbelievers honorable, so that when they speak against you as they see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. What does that mean? It means that when God comes again or calls us home, whichever is soonest, that these people have observed something in us, the work of God on behalf of us and our response of faithful, obedient loyalty to Him, and they may praise God, glorify God on the day of visitation. Why? Because they have seen something that they too, in turn, have responded to. In short, they too have come to faith. They too have come to faith. It's been well said sometimes. You used to be able to get by posters about this. I remember,

I grew up from age 12 in D-side Christian Fellowship just along the road. I don't know if still in room one of the church there's a poster there, but it says, we are the only Bibles, or you are the only Bible that some people will ever read. How are people going to find out about God? How can they hear unless someone preaches to them or witnesses to them, demonstrates to them something of who God is and what God can do for sinners like you and like me? They see it in our lives. Peter tells us that there are some people who will see that and, moreover, not only respond to us, but respond most importantly to who God is and what God has done. And when God comes again, when Jesus comes again, they will glorify Him because they have responded in turn personally to Him. Back to our passage into Israel encamped on the plains of Jericho. Whilst we may have expected the people of God, newly having crossed the Jordan River, to immediately embark upon the military campaign, going up to conquer Jericho and so on and so forth, well, God had different ideas. Don't you find sometimes that you and I, if you're a little bit like me, maybe it's just me, I have one kind of set of ideas. I think, you know what, this is this is how God's going to work and this is the time scale in which God is going to work and this is what's going to happen and therefore this is how I need to prepare and so on and so forth. And the kind of time scale, the calendar of God's work is almost set in my mind. And then God turns around and goes, do you know what, James, I've got a completely different time scale and there are some things which are far more important that you realize. And before we're going to do something that you think is more important, I need to take you aside and I need to show you that, do you know what, something that you have undervalued and don't truly realize is as important as it is? Well, that's important and I need to do that first in you. We need to do that together, James, okay?

[15 : 42] And it was exactly the same here for the people of God encamped upon the plains of Jericho. Because what is to be prior for them is a reconfirmation of those who had crossed the Jordan as indeed the people of God. Joshua 5 verses 1 to 12 is all about identity. Or better, it's about character.

Don't get hung up on the repeated repetition of circumcision and so on and so forth. That at its heart is all about identity. It's about character. How do we define character? Character is all those qualities that make a person, make a group, make a thing what he, she or it is and different, distinct from other people. Sometimes, and I'm going to take a leaf out of Jonathan Edwards' book, not the long jumper but the minister much used of God in the Great Awakening in the United States. Jonathan Edwards would preach sermons sometimes for a particular audience. He would preach, if you like, to the young people. He would preach to the adults. He would preach to the mum and dads. Allow me in 30 seconds to say something to the students here this evening. You will hear, and it's much in vogue, and it has been much in vogue. It's not a new thing. Everything goes around. What comes around goes around. That the more that we are like the people around about us who do not love God, know God, and honour God, the more that they will want to come to know Him, because they say, oh, these people are just like me. Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that marvellous? Not so. We need to be different and distinct. If we lose that distinctiveness because we have become so much like the world, there's nothing about us which commends us, and moreover, commends who God is and what God has done in us and is doing through us, to them. We need to be distinct, and that's not just to the students here. That's to all of us. Don't conform. Do not conform any longer, says Paul in Romans 12, to the ways of this world, to the pattern of the world. How do we not do that?

Instead, be renewed in your mind, and I think that's a reference to taking our time with God in His Word to learn, find out what pleases the Lord, we read in Luke's Gospel. How do we know what pleases the Lord?

We read God's Word. We find out who He is. We find out what honours Him and glorifies Him and how we are to live in response to Him. We become different. We're in the world, but we're not of the world, and people round about us say, there's something different about you. What is it? And we have the opportunity, with the gentleness and respect of which Peter shortly speaks of in 1 Peter 3, to share our faith with them, why we believe what we believe. The foundations upon which the nation of Israel was built, their identity, if you like, rested upon the Lord's sovereign choice and call of Abraham. It all goes back, if you like, to Abraham. The Lord's promise, recall, to Abraham to make him into a great nation, of which we read in Genesis 12, verse 2. The revelation to Abraham of the nature of God, and the only acceptable response as His created people to God, as I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless. Walk before me and be blameless. Genesis 17, verse 1. The covenant will call again between Abraham, who was to remain faithful to God and to God's Word, and God who would bless Abraham.

In Genesis 17, this covenant was to be accompanied by the sign of circumcision, both for Abraham and for Abraham's descendants. The Lord God says to Abraham, as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised, you shall be circumcised, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant. We may therefore here in Joshua 5 appreciate now the necessity and the importance of Joshua circumcising all the people. All the people born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt, who had not been circumcised, as we read in verse 5 of chapter 5. Because their very identity as Abraham's descendants, who were Abraham's descendants? Those who had been circumcised. God has made that clear in Genesis 17.

[20 : 40] Here their very identity as Abraham's descendants, thereby as beneficiaries of God's covenant. Well, all of that was seriously in doubt. Moreover, it was to Abraham's descendants, and therefore to those who had been circumcised, identifying themselves as such, that God had promised the land of Canaan.

And here the people are just in, and no more, the land of Canaan. The Lord says to Abraham, Genesis 17, verse 8, I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. To be children of the covenant, to be inheritors of the promises and possessors of the land, the people here needed to re-identify themselves again as Abraham's descendants, as the people of God. Because unless and until they did that, in context, unless and until the males of the community had been circumcised, firstly, they could not remember the Lord's saving act and deliverance of them from the might of Egypt in the celebration of the Passover. As the Lord instructed Moses at the end of Exodus 12, verse 48, no uncircumcised person shall eat of it, shall eat of the Passover. You can't do that. This is something for my people. And until and unless you identify yourselves as one of my people, you cannot eat of the Passover. Secondly, the promised land simply did not belong to these people at this point, and it remained questionable at best whether God would help them in its conquest and possession.

Were they the Lord's people? Had they identified themselves as the Lord's people? Well, not yet. And this is why the Lord says to Joshua, you need to circumcise all the males that have been born along the way. Joshua and the people submitted to this painful command of God. The people's historic disobedience in the wilderness, what's referred to in verse 9 as the reproach of Egypt, was rolled away.

And whilst the fighting men would have been most vulnerable to attack, from all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan and to the west, and all the Canaanites who were by the sea, we read that the Lord, again confirming his word given to Joshua through the words of Rehab in chapter 2, verses 8 and following, for the Lord had caused the hearts of the kings, of the Canaanite and Amorite kings, and their people to melt, and the courage to fail them, so that they could not at this time face the Israelites in battle. What may we understand from this? We may understand that the Lord prepares in advance for the faithful response of his people. The Lord prepares in advance for the faithful response of his people. We may also understand that the Lord responds in blessing to the faithful obedience of his people. This is not some kind of skewed health, wealth, and prosperity gospel. It's scripture. When we are obedient to who God is and to God's word, then God says in his word, he who honors me, she who honors me, they who honor me, I will honor. Sometimes we get to see that.

Here, most of the time we'll get to see that when the Lord calls us home or comes again, and we see the treasures of heaven, and we see the way. The Lord will draw us to one side. He says, you see how you responded to me at that point in faithful, obedient loyalty. I just want to let you know that you honored me and glorified me then, in ways that at the time you had no concept of, no understanding of. And in so doing, other people came to know me too. That may or may not happen, but we pray that it will do. Having been circumcised and having remembered the Passover as commanded by God, what do we read? The day after, the very day after that the people had, having been circumcised, now were able to remember the Passover, what did they do? They ate some of the produce of the land.

[25 : 01] Verse 11, and the next day the manna ceased. They ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year. The Lord responding in blessing to the faithful, obedient loyalty of his people to his commands.

I believe that there are many applications of this passage for us today, this evening. Firstly, as then, so for people today, our identity as the people of God is confirmed by our obedience to the commands and to the word of God. As the Holy Spirit through John teaches us in John's first epistle, by this we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, I know him, but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word in him truly the love of God is perfected. 1 John 2, 3 to 5. There are some things in Scripture that we find following through from the Old Testament right into the New Testament, and this is one of those things. That the identity of the Lord's people is confirmed, is manifested, made known by your, by my, of faithful obedience to who God is and what God has said in his word.

So also for God's people today, obedience results in blessing. As Jesus taught, if anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we, Father and Son, Father and Jesus, will come to him, come to her, and make our home with him. John 14, verse 23. What greater blessing can there be than this? Not only being in Christ, saved by Christ, co-heirs with Christ, but that the Son and the Father, in a way that our minds struggle to grasp, in and through the Holy Spirit come to dwell with us and in us. Friends, that's blessing. When the eternal God, whom the highest heavens cannot contain, as the psalmist tells us, comes in some way that we don't fully understand, comes to make his home in your heart and in my heart. That's blessing.

In the church, in our faith, as well as in these days of well-publicized ID fraud, it behoves us to check, to confirm that what we think is our identity as God's people is indeed our identity. Whilst there is no longer the necessity, thank goodness, of a physical sign of membership to the people of God, the Lord, through Paul, challenges us, nonetheless, nevertheless, to do the following. Examine yourself, test yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Are you obeying God?

Are you listening to God? Or do you find yourselves this evening knowing in your heart of hearts that you're ignoring God, and as we said a little of this morning, stopping your ears to who God is calling you to be, where God is calling you to go, to whom God is asking you to go, whether that be at university, at college, in the workplace, in the home, in the neighbourhood, and so on and so forth.

[28 : 39] Are we listening to God? Are we responding in faithful, obedient loyalty to who God is, and what God has done? Sometimes it's easier for us to take a step to one side and to pose a theoretical scenario, because it's a little bit easier for us than kind of putting ourselves in that spot, and we're going to do that for the next couple of minutes or so. Let me pose to you a theoretical scenario for you to consider.

What if Joshua and the people encamped upon the plains of Jericho had refused to obey the Lord? What if they had considered, if the men had considered, well, you know what, there's absolutely no way that I am going to be circumcised. It's quite simply too painful, and I am not going to bother.

What if the people, therefore, had not commemorated, remembered, and celebrated the Passover, the Lord's deliverance in love and by his sovereign power and might of them from Egypt and the taskmasters and the slavery, and brought them across the Red Sea and into the Promised Land? What if they'd not bothered to do that either? The question is this, would God's people then have ever conquered and possessed the promised land? I suggest to you that the answer is certainly not. Certainly not. Why?

Let me found this on Scripture. We only need to recall the lesson to Israel of the consequences, not of a nation's disobedience, but one man's disobedience. I'm thinking, of course, of Achan in chapter 7. Remember how after the conquest of Jericho, the walls come tumbling down. What had God said to his people beforehand? The destruction of the city, all the people, all the animals, all the property is dedicated to me, because I have worked. I have conquered Jericho. You, okay, you walked around it, but there was nothing really that you did that could have brought these walls down. I acted in mighty power on behalf of you, my people, and I want you to recognize that by dedicating all of these people, all of these things, and some of this we find difficult today, but I want you to remember that I am the one who delivered you and acted on your behalf by giving me all of this stuff, all of these people, all of these possessions. Well, Achan's kind of looking around, and he's going, that's a nice bit of gold, and I could do with a bit of silver, and you know what I could do with some nice threads. I'm going to take those garments as well, and Achan, as we recall, kind of dug a wee hole in underneath his tent, and he buried them, and he thought nothing more of it, and then Achan and the other fighting men decided, well, you know what? Jericho was a bit of a breeze. I reckon that we can do the same for AI, and without much thought, certainly with little prayer, they went up, and they thought we're going to go and conquer AI, and they ended up being defeated and running away proverbially with their tails between their legs, and many Israelites that day lost their lives. Why? Because one man had disobeyed what God had clearly said, and there was the whole business about drawing lots and finding out what clan it was and what tribe and what family, and eventually they realized that it was this man,

Achan. One man's disobedience resulted in the people of God not being able to conquer, at least at first, the city of Ai. I suggest to you that from Scripture we can therefore extrapolate from that and say that if Joshua and the people had said, you know what? I'm not going to bother with being circumcised. I'm not going to be bothered with celebrating the Passover, that they would not, that God, they would not certainly, but God would not have acted on their behalf to help them to conquer the promised land. Friends, the Lord's word today can be as painful in a different way as the Lord's word then. The Lord's word in Hebrews is after all not for now, but it's described as living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, to the cerning of thoughts and the intentions of the heart. And if you take the time to read Hebrews 4, you'll realize that again it's all about God's people identifying themselves as God's people. The warning beforehand, before the beginning of Hebrews 4, again we referred a little to this this morning, is the warning from history of the Lord's people hardening their hearts and not responding to him. And therefore they were lost. And the Lord says, do you know what? My word today tests hearts and asks the question purposefully, sometimes forcefully, sometimes painfully.

[33 : 32] Are you listening? Are you obeying? Are you responding? Are you my people? So this evening, who are you? Who are you? Why are you here? Why are you here? Apart from getting in from the cold, why are you here?

Will we trust and submit to the great physician, to God himself, as he skillfully, compassionately applies the double-edged sword of his word to our lives, proves our identity, tests our character?

For this passage teaches us that character, that who we are as the Lord's people, our distinct identity, different from the world amongst those with whom we live, our distinct identity as the Lord's people, is so more important than works and ministry.

Yes, rightfully rejoice in the 90 to 100 people sometimes coming to little lambs, to all that is going on in the weekly diary of the church here. But remember that character, that identity and the sight of God is far more important than works.

Works are to come out of our identity. God, if we go to Ephesians, the truth is clear, that God saved us and delivered us by his great love, and because he is rich in mercy, he has rescued us even when we were sinners. It is now that we are able to do the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do. It's out of our identity, it's out of our union with Jesus, it's from us being God's children and indwelt by his Holy Spirit as his saved children, that we can now do these works, do these things. Friends, the fruit of obedience is far, far more important than any gifts. The confirmation, just as it was for God's covenant community of old, the confirmation for us today of our identity is through obedience. And this is all important if we are to see blessing, and if the lost are to see with us the presence and the power of God, and in their own way, and according to the Lord's sovereign grace and choosing, say, do you know what, I want to be part of that too. I want to be part of that too. I want to be part of them too. I want to have Jesus as my Saviour and follow him as my Lord. Let's pray.