

# Get on the right side!

## *Lessons for Overcomers:*

Joshua 5:13-15

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Bethany Church

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A woman in an airport bought a bag of cookies as she waited for her flight. She sat down and got lost in a book she brought along. At one point, however, she became aware of a young man reaching into the pack of cookies next to her. He started eating them one by one. She didn't want to make a fuss, so at first she ignored him. Then, slightly bothered, she also reached into the bag and ate. Her irritation grew as she thought, "If I weren't a Christian woman, I would give this insensitive, self-absorbed thief a black-eye." Every time she ate a cookie, he ate and enjoyed one too. A dialogue between their eyes began and when only one cookie was left, she wondered what he would do. He smiled at her nervously, grabbed the last cookie, broke it in two, offered her half and ate the other half. She did not match that smile. She took the half, turned away and thought, "What an insolent man!" She was relieved to hear her flight number called. She got up and without turning back, entered the gate. Seated in the plane, she dove into her bag to retrieve the book and found her pack of cookies. She discovered that the insolent, insensitive, self-absorbed thief was her, and a generous young man was her victim!

Her story, perhaps with the exception of the discovery, is played out in a million different ways and shades each and every day. We are a people blinded and broken by sin who quite unknowingly multiply victims. The prophet Isaiah declared:

*We are all infected and impure with sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall. And our sins, like the wind, sweep us away.* (Isaiah 64:6, NLT)

If we actually believe that prophecy, we will think and relate differently to one another. Indeed, it explains the short story we just read from the Bible.

Joshua was given the task of leading Israel into the Promised Land. He was to be strong and courageous. Before he leads Israel across the Jordan River to conquer the city of Jericho, he is instructed to have the Israelites purify themselves. They must all go through a purification ritual. Once they cross the river, all the males born since they left Egypt are to be circumcised. Their identity at that moment shifts from escapees to children of promise. They then celebrate God's deliverance in a Passover meal. The next day the manna that had appeared for them to eat in the desert stops. Now they're to harvest the grain and fruit of the Promised Land. Notice the dependence upon the mercy, provision and power God. It is grace and faith in the grace-giver that is bringing this people a new life. It is grace and faith in the grace-giver that is overcoming the evil of people and the hostility of nature. Dependent upon grace and acting through faith in the grace-giver, Joshua walks toward the first military objective, Jericho. When he looks up from the path, he sees a man looking at him with his sword drawn. "Are you a friend or foe?" asks Joshua. "Neither one!" is the reply, "I am the commander of the Lord's army."

Why is this encounter significant? What are we to learn? We are to learn who we are. The issue isn't whether God is your friend or foe. It is "are you God's friend or foe?" The world doesn't belong to you. God's not an intruder; you're his invitee. You're on his turf. It belongs to him. God showed Joshua that he didn't favor Israel over the people they'd displace. God had given trust of the land to Canaan and his descendants, but they had become foes of its owner. Therefore, they were rejected. Whose side would Joshua serve: God or his enemies? Whose side are we on? Is Bethany on God's side? Is Rochester on God's side? Is Minnesota on God's side? Is the United States on God's side? Are we God's friends or foes?

The Commander of the Lord's Army emphasized that message when he told Joshua to take off his sandals because the ground on which he was standing is holy. That is the same action God commanded of Moses at the burning bush. Why was it important for Joshua and Moses to remove their sandals? Do you remember Jesus' instruction to his disciples to shake the dust off their sandals when they left a village that rejected them? That act was a witness, and so was this. Joshua and Moses' sandals carried the soil and dust of endeavors by a people whose righteous acts were but filthy rags. The dust was a residue and reminder of the hostility of their sins. Now they better remove such remnants of hostility as they stand on turf where God is present and active. Don't track sin on God's carpet of righteousness. Both Joshua and Moses learned that they were to do God's bidding in God's way in God's world.

Do you realize that you and I are making our home on God's land in God's world? Do we realize that we are earning our money doing business with God's resources? Do we really know where we are? Do we then realize we are soiling his land with our sinful actions and attitudes? Are we enemy squatters on God's land hoping the owner will ignore, tolerate or even bless us? Jesus came to reconcile us to God, not God to us. We learn from Joshua that we must know who we are and where we are if we are to overcome that which is arrayed against us. I think we also must know what we want.

Gideon wanted freedom. However, had Gideon wanted holiness, had Gideon wanted to be on God's side, he might have overcome something much more personal and equally painful than the thousands of enemy warriors he overcame with 300 men. Gideon practiced the sexual ethic of his people. Ignoring God's word and implementing the cultural practice, he had multiple wives and partners. He gained fame for having 70 sons, groomed to rule. He also had one born to a prostitute. After Gideon's death that one, Abimelech, plotted to kill all seventy so that he

alone would rule. Eventually only one son survived the plot. Gideon's faith overcame hopeless circumstance, yet his cultural vision, poisoned by sin, left his own family in ruins.

We know about cultural vision and collective sinful attitudes and actions. Our righteous ancestors practiced slavery, segregation, and racism. The light of history exposes some of the previous generations' toxins whether it is child-labor sweatshops or stoicism in love. I think of Isaiah's cry:

***Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...*** (Isaiah 6:5, NIV)

The grace for Isaiah and his people, the grace for Gideon and his people, the grace for Joshua and Israel, the grace for you, me and our people, is that a sacrifice was made to remove our judgment. That sacrifice is Jesus, the lamb who was slain before the creation of the world. Perhaps, you want to overcome an illness, an injury, a financial problem or some relational concern. Your desire is understandable. It is not different from the concerns of these people of faith whose actions have been recorded in the Bible for us. The question I pose is could there be something even more vital to overcome? Do you know what you want? Do you want to succeed but leave your family or community in ruin? What do you really want?

The first lesson for overcomers is to know who you are, where you are and what you want. I'm God's child, living in God's world, tainted with attitudes and actions that, although tolerated by my church and affirmed by my city, are hostile to God and destroy all we love. I want to choose the right side. I want exactly what Jesus paid for – freedom from sin and its judgment. Then every other victory won in faith won't be shallow or hollow, but profound and lasting.