

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 5 sits at the threshold of the conquest. Israel has crossed the Jordan on dry ground (chapter 4), and the nations of Canaan are paralyzed with fear (5:1). What happens next is not a military advance but a liturgical pause: circumcision is renewed, Passover is celebrated, manna ceases, and the commander of the LORD's army appears to Joshua. The chapter moves through four distinct episodes — each one concerned not with what Israel will do militarily but with who Israel is covenantally. The rite of circumcision reinstates the covenant sign for a generation born in the wilderness whose fathers had died under judgment. The Passover celebration marks Israel's arrival at the land promised to Abraham. The cessation of manna signals that the era of wilderness provision is over and the era of land-possession has begun. The theophanic encounter at Jericho's outskirts reframes the entire campaign: Joshua is not the commanding general — he is the subordinate. The LORD's commander has come not to fight on Israel's side but to take command Himself.

This Text — Intent

God is calling Israel — and through Israel, the reader — to understand that the conquest of Canaan is not a human military operation with divine assistance. It is a holy war fought by the LORD Himself, in which Israel participates as a covenant people properly constituted and submitted. The rites of circumcision and Passover are not delays to the military campaign; they *are* the campaign's foundation. A people who enter the land uncircumcised and unconsecrated would be entering as anything but what God has made them. The intent is to produce in Israel — and in the reader — a deep reorientation of posture: not “what are we going to do?” but “who are we before the LORD, and is the LORD the one leading?” God is seeking to move Israel from a military mindset to a covenantal one, and to move every reader from self-reliance in the face of overwhelming opposition to the posture Joshua is commanded to take: face down before the commander of the LORD's army.

Subject Sentence: Israel is consecrated and re-commissioned at the threshold of the Promised Land.

Primary Claim: Before God gives His people the land, He reconstitutes them as His covenant people — because what God accomplishes through His people is inseparable

from who His people are before Him. Every advance into what God has promised must begin not with strategy but with surrender.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “disgrace of Egypt” (v. 9) and the meaning of Gilgal

The phrase “I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” is interpretively significant. The Hebrew *gālal* (“to roll”) provides the folk etymology for Gilgal. The question is what “reproach of Egypt” means. Three readings compete: (1) the reproach Egypt *brought upon* Israel — the shame of slavery and the taunt that Israel’s God could not sustain His people; (2) the reproach Israel bore *from* Egypt in the form of uncircumcision — entering the land uncircumcised would be to enter as Egypt-shaped people rather than covenant people; (3) the reproach that Egypt now bears because of Israel’s miraculous deliverance. The most textually coherent reading integrates the first two: the reproach is the combined shame of slavery, wilderness failure, and the uncircumcision that marked a generation born outside the covenant rite. The rolling away is accomplished not by arrival in the land but by the covenant renewal that now reconstitutes them. The Reformed reading emphasizes that God’s initiative is primary — “I have rolled away” — not Israel’s crossing or their military readiness.

The encounter with the commander of the LORD’s army (vv. 13-15) — theophany or Christophany?

This is the most significant interpretive divergence in the chapter. The figure described in verses 13-15 is neither human commander nor mere angel: he identifies himself as the “commander of the army of the LORD,” accepts Joshua’s worship without rebuking it (contrast Revelation 22:8-9, where an angel refuses worship), and commands Joshua to remove his sandals because the ground is holy — the identical command given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:5). The question is whether this is the pre-incarnate Christ (the Angel of the LORD, the second person of the Trinity appearing in theophanic form) or a created angelic being functioning in a high command role.

The Reformed tradition, following Calvin, Owen, and the majority of the Westminster divines, identifies the Angel of the LORD throughout the Old Testament with the pre-incarnate Son. The acceptance of worship and the “holy ground” language are decisive: no created being accepts worship in Scripture without immediate correction. The parallel with Moses at Horeb is not coincidental — it signals that what Joshua is encountering is the same divine presence that constituted Moses for his commission. This reading is to be preferred over the “created angel” reading not because it is theologically convenient but because the text provides both the worship-acceptance and the holy ground command as markers that locate this figure within the divine identity rather than the creaturely order.

Acknowledge: Dispensational interpreters rightly note the connection between this figure and the divine warrior motif throughout Joshua and Judges — the LORD fights for Israel. This insight is worth retaining even where its broader Israel/Church framework is not adopted.

Qualify: Some Baptist and broadly evangelical readings treat the figure as a high-ranking angel and thus read verse 15 as simply high reverence. This reading can acknowledge the text's solemnity without fully accounting for the worship-acceptance data. It qualifies the significance without adequately explaining it.

Refute: Any reading that treats this encounter primarily as a pre-battle military briefing misses the entire rhetorical function of the passage. The commander does not give Joshua a battle plan. He reorients Joshua's posture entirely — Joshua is not in charge. This is not intelligence for a commander; it is consecration for a subordinate.

The circumcision rite (vv. 2-9) — covenant renewal or initiation?

Some readings emphasize this as a new initiation, importing New Covenant categories (Colossians 2:11-12's "circumcision made without hands"). While Colossians 2's typological connection is legitimate and canonical, it must not flatten what the text itself emphasizes: this is *covenant renewal* — reinstatement of a sign that had lapsed during the wilderness judgment, not a new institution. The generation born in the wilderness was not outside the covenant community by virtue of uncircumcision — they were born of covenant parents — but they lacked the covenant sign. The renewal restores what had lapsed under the shadow of the wilderness judgment. The Reformed reading maintains the distinction between the sign and the reality it signifies, without either dismissing the sign as mere ritual or elevating it above its covenantal function.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 17:9-14** — The Abrahamic covenant establishes circumcision as the covenant sign; anyone uncircumcised is "cut off from his people." Joshua 5's renewal of circumcision restores what the wilderness generation lacked and grounds Israel's entry into the land explicitly within Abrahamic covenant fidelity.
- **Exodus 3:1-6** — Moses at the burning bush receives the same "remove your sandals" command Joshua receives at Jericho. The parallel is not accidental: the holy ground command marks both men as standing before the divine presence, constituted for a commission they could not initiate themselves. This canonical echo signals that Joshua's campaign begins exactly as Moses' commission did — in surrender before the LORD's holiness.
- **Exodus 12:1-14, 43-49** — The Passover institution specifies that uncircumcised men may not participate. The sequential logic of Joshua 5 (circumcision, *then* Passover) is canonically mandated: Israel cannot celebrate its redemption from

Egypt with an uncircumcised community. The land-arrival Passover of Joshua 5 thus completes what Egypt's Passover began.

- **Colossians 2:11-15** — Paul explicitly invokes circumcision and its fulfillment in Christ's death and resurrection, identifying baptism as the New Covenant analogue. The physical rite of Joshua 5 is the type; the "circumcision made without hands" — the putting off of the body of flesh in Christ — is the antitype. The Reformed typological reading of Joshua 5 finds its New Testament grounding here.
- **Revelation 19:11-16** — The divine warrior motif reaches its eschatological climax: the rider on the white horse, whose name is the Word of God, leads the armies of heaven. The commander of the LORD's army in Joshua 5 is the same figure — Christ, the warrior-king — whom Revelation presents in His final campaign. Joshua's face-down posture before this figure anticipates the posture of every creature before the returning Christ.

Aim: To demonstrate that before God advances His purposes through His people, He constitutes them — and that the proper posture of those entering what God has promised is not strategic confidence but covenantal surrender.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:1	The kings of the Amorites and Canaanites hear of the Jordan crossing and lose heart; their spirit melts	Sets the military context — the nations are paralyzed, yet God's response is not immediate advance but covenant renewal
5:2	The LORD commands Joshua to circumcise Israel "again"	"Again" (<i>šûb</i>) signals renewal, not first-time initiation; a lapsed covenant rite is being reinstated
5:3	Joshua circumcises the people at Gibeath-haaraloth ("hill of the foreskins")	Place name preserved as memorial; the act is communal and public, not private
5:4-7	Explanation: the generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness due to disobedience; the new generation born in the	The wilderness circumcision lapse is explained as connected to the judgment on the Exodus generation; the sign lapsed under the

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	wilderness had not been circumcised	shadow of judgment
5:8	After circumcision the people remained in camp until healed	Israel is temporarily vulnerable — a militarily irrational pause that signals the priority of covenant over strategy
5:9	The LORD declares: “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you”; the place is called Gilgal	God’s declarative act of grace — the reproach is rolled away by divine pronouncement, not by military achievement
5:10	Israel keeps the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at Gilgal	The land-arrival Passover completes and mirrors the Egypt-departure Passover; the redemption arc closes
5:11	The day after Passover they eat the produce of the land — unleavened cakes and parched grain	The land begins to yield; the promise reaches its first concrete fulfillment
5:12	The manna ceases the day after they ate from the land	The wilderness provision is definitively over; the mode of God’s sustaining grace changes with the new era
5:13	Joshua near Jericho sees a man standing with a drawn sword; Joshua confronts him: “Whose side are you on?”	The drawn sword signals readiness for war; Joshua’s question reveals a military commander’s instinct — he is still thinking in “sides”
5:14	The figure identifies himself as commander of the LORD’s army; Joshua falls face down and asks what his master commands	Joshua’s posture shifts entirely: from military commander to prostrate subordinate; he asks not for a plan but for a command
5:15	The commander orders Joshua to remove his sandals: the place is holy	Direct echo of Exodus 3:5; the ground is holy because of the divine presence, not the battle; Joshua is on holy ground, not a command post

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	5:1	The Nations Melt — the Stage Is Set
2	5:2-9	Circumcision Renewed — the Covenant Sign Restored
3	5:10-12	Passover Kept and Manna Ceased — the Redemption Arc Completed
4	5:13-15	The Commander Appears — Joshua Reconstituted as Subordinate

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel is consecrated and re-commissioned at the threshold of the Promised Land.

Primary Claim: Before God gives His people the land, He reconstitutes them as His covenant people — because what God accomplishes through His people is inseparable from who His people are before Him. Every advance into what God has promised must begin not with strategy but with surrender.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] The “delays” before God’s advances are not obstacles to His purposes — they are constitutive of them. Israel is at its most militarily vulnerable during the circumcision episode: the men are incapacitated, the enemy is nearby, and God has ordered a pause. Every instinct says move now while the enemy is afraid. God says: not yet — first, be who I have called you to be. The reader who faces an unexpected delay before something God has promised must resist the interpretation that the delay is a failure or a problem to be solved. God’s preparation of His people is not a preliminary to His work — it is His work. The question to ask in seasons of apparent delay is not “when will this end?” but “what is God constituting in me that I cannot enter this without?”

2. [Affections/Worship] The cessation of manna is a gift, not an abandonment — and we must learn to receive God’s changing provisions without mourning the old ones. For forty years, manna was the daily sign of God’s faithfulness. The morning it stops, some in Israel might have felt the silence as loss. But the manna ceases because the land has

arrived — the sign of provision gives way to the provision itself. The reader who has known God’s sustaining grace in a particular form — a season of felt nearness, a specific community, a ministry role — and has seen it end, must resist interpreting that ending as divine withdrawal. God changes the mode of His provision when the mode has served its purpose. The question is not “where did the manna go?” but “what is the land He is now giving?”

3. [Will/Behavior] When you stand before what God has promised, ask not “whose side is God on?” but “what does my master command?” Joshua’s first question to the commander — “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” — is the wrong question, and the commander declines to answer it on Joshua’s terms. Joshua has been thinking of this campaign as his campaign with God’s assistance. The commander’s appearance and Joshua’s subsequent posture (face down, sandals off, asking “what does my master command?”) represent a complete reorientation. The reader who approaches a calling, a decision, or a difficult assignment by asking “is God with me on this?” has not yet arrived at Joshua’s final posture. The right question is: “LORD, I am face down before You — what do You command?” This is not a passive question. It is the most active posture possible — but it begins in surrender, not strategy.

4. [Mind/Belief] The reproach you carry has already been declared rolled away — the question is whether you will live in that declaration. “I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” is a divine declarative act at Gilgal, not a process or a reward for performance. The reproach — of slavery, of wilderness failure, of the entire generation’s unfaithfulness — is pronounced gone by God’s word before a single battle is fought. The New Covenant reader carries the fuller form of this declaration: in Christ, the condemnation has been removed (Romans 8:1), the reproach of the entire old life rolled away. The pitfall is to continue living as Egypt-shaped people — shame-driven, striving to prove worthiness — after God has already spoken the declarative word. Receive the declaration. Live from it, not toward it.

5. [Affections/Worship] The God who commands you into impossible situations has already sent His commander ahead — your fear is standing on holy ground. The encounter in verses 13-15 occurs at Jericho — the first and most formidable city Israel must take. The divine commander does not appear in the camp; he appears at the walls of the enemy’s stronghold, sword already drawn. The reader facing an impossible assignment, an unconquerable situation, or a calling that exceeds every human resource must receive this: the Commander of the LORD’s armies has already arrived at the place that frightens you. He is not waiting for your courage. He is waiting for your posture. The ground in front of the impossible thing is holy ground — because He is there. Take your sandals off.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 5 teaches that God’s purposes are inseparable from God’s people being properly constituted before Him. The chapter’s structure — covenant

renewal, memorial celebration, provision-transition, and theophanic reorientation — reveals that God does not use uncommitted or unreconstituted instruments. The LORD does not advance His kingdom through a people who have not been shaped by the covenant signs and stories that identify them as His. Equally, the chapter teaches that God's initiative is primary throughout: He rolls away the reproach (v. 9), He causes the manna to cease (v. 12), and He sends His commander ahead (vv. 13-15). Israel does not manufacture readiness; God constitutes it. The theology of divine action and human receptivity that runs through the whole chapter climaxes in Joshua's face-down posture before the divine warrior: the proper human response to God's initiative is not co-leadership but worship, submission, and obedience to command.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Joshua 5 is a compressed display of the Reformed ordo of grace applied to a covenant community: God's prior act establishes the people's identity and removes their reproach before they accomplish anything. Circumcision here is the covenant sign that marks the boundary between Egypt and the land, between the old death-generation and the new life-generation — functioning typologically in exactly the way Paul develops in Colossians 2:11-15, where circumcision finds its fulfillment in the "circumcision of Christ" (His death, which is the believer's death). The Passover celebration grounds the entire conquest in redemptive-historical memory: they are not conquerors by right but recipients of grace, entering by the blood of the lamb what they could not enter by their own merit. The theophany of the commander (vv. 13-15) is the chapter's most explicitly Christological moment — the pre-incarnate Son appears as the true conquest-leader, removing any ground for Israel's (or any believer's) confidence in human commanders, military strategies, or personal competence. Reformed theology's insistence that God alone is Savior and that human instruments are exactly that — instruments — is displayed with unusual clarity in this chapter's architecture: Israel is constituted, consecrated, and then placed under the command of the LORD's own warrior before a single stone of Jericho falls.

Main Takeaway

God does not advance His purposes through unprepared, unreconstituted, self-directed people — and the preparation He requires is not training or strategy but covenantal identity and surrendered posture. The reproach of your past has already been declared rolled away. The Commander has already arrived at the walls of whatever is in front of you. Take your sandals off. You are standing on holy ground, and the question is not whose side God is on — it is what your Master commands.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Joshua 5 as merely a transitional chapter between the Jordan crossing (ch. 4) and Jericho (ch. 6), and thus rushing through it.** The chapter's placement between two dramatic events (the crossing and the walls falling) can make it seem like narrative throat-clearing. In fact, it is the theological linchpin of the entire conquest narrative: the ground for every subsequent victory is laid here, not in military preparation but in covenantal reconstitution. A sermon that uses this chapter primarily as a setup for Jericho has inverted the text's own emphasis.
- **Moralizing the circumcision episode as "get right with God before you act."** While there is a legitimate application here, the bare imperative form — "make sure you're obedient before God will use you" — misses the initiative structure of the text. God commands, and God declares the reproach rolled away. The application must be grounded in what God is doing, not in a performance standard Israel must meet. Chapell's Fallen Condition Focus is operative here: the fallen condition is not mere disobedience but a generation-long lapse in covenant identity that only God's word and command can restore.
- **Treating the theophanic encounter (vv. 13-15) as primarily a vision of military empowerment — "God is on your side, you can conquer anything."** This is precisely the reading the text refuses. The commander declines to identify which "side" he is on and redirects Joshua entirely. The text's application is the *opposite* of "God is in your corner": it is "you are under God's command, which is a different thing entirely." Preaching this passage as motivational empowerment for human endeavors domesticates the theophany and misses its reorienting force.
- **Skipping or minimizing the manna cessation (v. 12) as a logistical footnote.** The end of manna is a watershed redemptive-historical moment: forty years of miraculous daily provision concludes with a single sentence. For Israel, this is the transition from wilderness-mode to land-mode. Theologically, it teaches that God's provision is always appropriate to the season — and that the end of one form of provision is not withdrawal but graduation. Preaching that ignores verse 12 misses one of the chapter's most pastoral notes for people in transition seasons.
- **Failing to identify the commander of the LORD's army Christologically.** The combination of worship-acceptance (v. 14) and the holy ground command (v. 15) — both markers of the divine presence in the Old Testament — demands identification with the pre-incarnate Christ. A sermon that treats this figure as a created angel or an unidentified heavenly official has left the passage's Christological center unexcavated. The canonical connection to Revelation 19 (the divine warrior's eschatological appearance) should anchor the preaching of this passage within the whole redemptive-historical arc.

- **Missing the theological significance of the sequence: circumcision → Passover → manna ceases → theophany.** The four episodes are not a list; they are an ordered argument. Covenant identity is restored (circumcision), redemptive memory is renewed (Passover), the old era of provision gives way to the new (manna ceases), and the true commander takes His place at the head (theophany). Preaching any of these episodes in isolation, without their sequential logic, loses the chapter's cumulative theological claim: that Israel is being fully reconstituted — sign, story, provision, and command — before the conquest begins.