

# Guilt and Freedom

by David Roper

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*The sermon explores how the biblical events of circumcision at Gilgal and Rahab's faith illustrate the themes of guilt and freedom in the Christian life.*

**Duration:** 32:34

**Scripture:** Joshua 3:16, Joshua 5:1, Matthew 22:37, Matthew 22:39, James 2:17

**Topics:** "Faith And Obedience", "Spiritual Freedom"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on the book of Joshua and the thrilling days of Israel's conquest of the land. He emphasizes the importance of faith and obedience as crucial lessons learned during this time. The sermon focuses on the story of the conquest of Jericho, where the pre-incarnate Lord himself, the angel of Yahweh, takes over as the commander-in-chief. The preacher highlights the faith and actions of Rahab, a prostitute who protected the Israelite spies and was promised safety in return. The sermon concludes with Joshua encountering a man with a drawn sword, who declares that he is not there to take sides.

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## Transcript

One of our favorite pastimes as kids was to gather around the radio on Saturday morning and listen to some of the programs that were broadcast in the morning. We had one of these radios that looked like a beehive and it had Super Heterodyne on the front. I'll never be able to forget that.

Someone came up this morning and explained to me for the first time what Super Heterodyne meant. And we used to listen to all things like the Lone Ranger and others. And I remember the first thing the announcer said when the Lone Ranger came on the air was this, Return with me now to the thrilling days of yesteryear.

From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver. I can see that some of you can remember. The Lone Ranger rides again.

I've never forgotten that. As I was studying Joshua this past week, I recall those lines. Return with us now to the thrilling days of yesteryear.

Because that's what we're doing in the book of Joshua. We're going back and recalling these thrilling days in the life of Israel as they conquered the land. And in effect following their conquest and traveling through

the land with our children, looking at the monuments that they left behind.

And from these monuments recalling the lessons, the very crucial lessons in faith and obedience that they learned at each of these sites. Last week I read and commented on the journey across the Jordan River and the two rock stone monuments that were left behind to commemorate that crossing and the significance of those two cairns that were left there. And today we want to look at two more.

In the first case, it's that of the circumcision of the nation of Israel at Gilgal and the name of Gilgal that was left behind as a monument. And secondly, the conversion of a Canaanite harlot, Rahab, at Jericho. And in this case, Rahab herself becomes the monument, the enduring monument to the grace of God.

Now let's turn to the fifth chapter of Joshua. And we'll begin reading with the first verse. This section of Joshua deals with the reinstatement of the right of circumcision.

When the nation came out of Israel, all the males were circumcised. But during the 40 years that they wandered in the wilderness, there were many children who were born who were not circumcised. They forsook the right.

The prophets tell us that they became stargazers, star worshippers. They gave way to idolatry. And the covenant sign of their relationship to the Lord was forsaken.

And so there were many children born during this time, the oldest of which might be 60 years old, who still had to be circumcised. And so this right needed to be reintroduced before they could conquer the land. It's always seemed significant to me that pain should precede this victory.

Before they could draw the sword on the Canaanites, they had to draw the knife on themselves. Something had to happen to them before they were ready to march in the victory that God had given to them. And in chapter 5, we have this incident recorded for us.

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. If you have a New American Standard Bible, you'll notice that the pronoun they in the next to last line is footnoted, and in the margin it's translated we, which is what the passage actually says. This evidently is an eyewitness account which gives it a certain vividness and impact, I think, perhaps more so than it ordinarily would have.

The person writing this account was there, saw these events and actually participated in them. Verse 2, 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 HaAralah.

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. And 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 he raised up in their place Joshua circumcised, for they were uncircumcised because they had not 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, today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. If you look at the chronology of this period carefully, you'll discover that this particular command was given on the tenth day of the first month of the year, exactly forty years after they left Egypt in fulfillment of the promise that God had made, that they would wander for forty years and then they would be taken into the land. Forty years to the day after they left Egypt, they arrived at Gilgal and it was on this day that circumcision was reenacted.

Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you, so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. And here you have that line again that recurs throughout Joshua, something exists to this day and in this particular event it's the name Gilgal taken from a Hebrew word that means to roll away in commemoration of the time that the disgrace, the shame, the defeat of Egypt is rolled away. Now, the rite of circumcision was the sign of the covenant relationship that Israel sustained with God.

It was given to Abraham as the sign of that symbol. It was something personal and private and intimate. It was not the sort of thing that a person could observe from outward appearances, just as the mark of our ownership today is not necessarily perceived outwardly.

As I look at you there, I know that many of you belong to the Lord. You have His stamp on you, but it's something personal and private, something very intimate, something associated with the very foundations of your being, the kind of basic drives of your life, and yet it's unseen. And that's what circumcision symbolized to the Jewish nation.

It was an unseen, unknown mark except to the individual. It marked the intimate relationship that they had with the Lord, the personal ownership of them, and the very foundations of their humanity belonged to the Lord. And these Israelites knew that this mark was far more than some external physical mark.

It was also a spiritual mark. God had put His mark on their life internally as well. Before this event at Gilgal, when they were on the plains of Moab on the east side of Jordan, Moses, twice in his final sermons to the nation of Israel, referred to a circumcision of the heart.

Something had to happen internally. In their heart, they had to know that they belonged to God and that they'd been cut off from the rest of life, from their past, from the old relationship that they'd experienced in Egypt. All of that was cut off.

They were separated from it. They had a new life in God. And that's what their circumcision meant to them.

And Paul says that we likewise bear the spiritual marks of circumcision. Circumcision for us is that seal of ownership and the mark that we've been cut off from the flesh, cut off from the old life. I think the passage through the Jordan is a picture of our identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

And that's the fact, you see, of our identification with Christ. But circumcision is a picture of the daily acting out of that identification with Christ and the acting on the basis of this truth that our old life has been cut off. We've been cut off from our old life.

The sins of the past and the guilt and the shame and the things that have embarrassed us in the past no longer need to dominate us. No longer need to make us feel guilty, nor do they have any power over us. We've been set free.

They're still there. The past is there. God never takes away the past.

And the memories may still be there. And the shame may occasionally come back to plug us. But we've been cut off in terms of its power and influence over us.

We no longer need to feel guilty and oppressed. The shame and the reproach and the indignity of Egypt have been rolled away. And that's Gilgal for us.

And Gilgal occurs in our experience not just once but many times, perhaps daily, when you have to count upon that fact. You have to reckon it to be true. For some of us, Gilgal occurs on the first and the fifteenth of each month.

That's when we pay the bills. And it's amazing how many men go right up the wall on the day that they're paying the bills. As the balance gets smaller and the checks get deeper, or the bills get deeper, there's a tendency to get a bit anxious and uptight and start lashing out at everyone around us and blame everybody and blame ourselves.

And it's almost like Old Faithful going off on the first and the fifteenth of every month. You can almost set your watch by it. But it doesn't have to be that way.

We don't have to be tyrannized by our fears and our failures. That becomes an opportunity to cut off the old, to not be dominated and tyrannized by these fears and failures and the frustrations of the past. That can become an opportunity for us to teach our children, to gather our children, and to pray through the needs and requirements of our family and together determine to live out a kind of responsible lifestyle into the Lord economically.

That's Gilgal. And that may occur daily in our experience. Opportunities to deal with the flesh and with its power in our life and to reckon ourselves to be dead indeed and to sin into the old life and to lay hold afresh of the power of God.

That's Gilgal. Those are places where we roll away the shame of the past and we act out of the newness of our life in Christ. And I'm sure many times as Jewish families walk by this site and it was called to their attention that this place was known as Gilgal, little children would ask their fathers or their mothers, why is this place called Gilgal? And that would be an opportunity for them to instruct that child about the nature of their identification with the Lord.

Just as it is in our homes, in our families. Now that's the first event after they cross Jordan, the monument at Gilgal. The second is found in chapter 6, the conquest of Jericho.

Let me tell you a bit about Jericho before we look at this chapter. Jericho was located on a level plain just above the site of Gilgal, about two miles away, about a half hour's walk from where Israel was camped. It was located in a very crucial site.

Behind Jericho, just a bit to the west, is a ridge about 1,500 feet high that's cut by gorges and it's only through those gorges that anyone can gain access to the central highlands in Canaan. Israel had to go

through those gorges. There's no other way into the interior.

And therefore they had to deal with Jericho. Jericho was located at a spot where they couldn't go around, they had to conquer it. And yet Jericho was a very impressive place.

It had withstood sieges many times. Those who excavate, who are excavating in Jericho now, say that at least 17 sieges of Jericho took place. They were very powerful, it's a very strong city.

It looked much like Greek cities with Necropolis in the center. There was a walled city in the middle, perhaps seven or eight acres in size. And around it there were suburbs, little hamlets and villages, cottages and farms.

They raised their corn and crops out in the open and then when the city was besieged they would run into the walled city and shut it. And this of course is what was true at this time. Jericho was buttoned up, the people were all inside waiting for the siege and the suburbs around were abandoned.

The walls were very thick and impressive, brick walls with a sloping ramp at the base, almost impossible to breach. And it was this that the nation of Israel faced. But they had to go through Jericho.

And so in the closing paragraph of chapter 5, Joshua goes out to reconnoiter. Perhaps he was passing through the suburbs, the little towns that were arranged around Jericho, because it says in verse 13, it came about when Joshua was in Jericho 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 to him, Are you for us or for our adversaries? This must have startled Joshua as he was making his reconnaissance, perhaps walking around the city and viewing the walls and a man appeared with his sword in his hand.

And I'm sure Joshua must have drawn his sword and challenged the man, Are you for us or for our adversaries? And his answer is no. Or as Bob Smith says, I'm not here to take sides, I've come here to take over. This was the pre-incarnate Lord himself, the angel of Yahweh, who had come to take over.

He was the commander in chief. He was the one who would plan the strategy. And so in chapter 6, in the opening paragraph of this chapter, he reveals to Joshua the plan that will enable him to overthrow the city.

Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sentence of Israel. No one went out and no one came in. And the Lord said to Joshua, See, I have given Jericho into your hand with its king and the valiant warriors.

Here's Jericho tightly buttoned up, no one coming in, no one coming out. Joshua is surveying the walls and the angel says, See, I've given you the city. And then he begins to outline the procedure that Joshua is to follow.

Verse 3, 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 ram's 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. Now that's not normally the way you besiege a city.

But the Lord frequently does the unexpected. Now that's the perspective that the nation of Israel had as they viewed the city from the outside. Now I'd like to give you another perspective from inside.

Because inside Jericho, there was a young lady who was looking out over the walls at the nation that was camped two miles below at Gilgal. Her name was Rahab. And she was a liberated woman.

And I say that on good authority because her name in Canaanite means one who is free. The Canaanite language of this time was very much like Hebrew. They're related languages as much as French and Spanish and English and German are related.

And they could frequently understand each other. A lot of the terms were interchangeable. Her name, Rahab, is the term that's frequently used in the Old Testament to describe a wide open place.

It was used to describe plazas, the open areas in the center of towns. It's the term that David uses in the Psalms when he says, God has brought me out into a broad place, a place without limits. And that was Rahab.

She was liberated. She was free. She lived at a time that our press today would say was a time of sexual enlightenment.

We're fortunate to have an awful lot of literature from this time and we know what life was like. The literature of this time describes some of the most graphic and specific sexual acts to be found anywhere in literature. And this was the environment that she lived in.

They were enlightened sexually. They found little figurines all over Palestine depicting deviant sexual acts of various types. Believe me, in the 3,500 years from that period until today, we've discovered nothing different.

They knew it all. They did it all. And Rahab had seen it all and participated in all of it.

She was a harlot. This expression, Rahab the harlot, bothered many of the old Jewish commentators and they tried to soften it somewhat by making her an innkeeper. The Hebrew term for harlot also means to feed and so they translated this as though she kept a boarding house there, but there's no question about her occupation.

She was a harlot. She was a prostitute. She was right in the middle of all of this sexual activity.

That was her life. But she was miserable. She was absolutely miserable.

She had learned the truth that at first one may do things because he feels free to do it, but after a while he or she does those things because they have to do them. She was not free. We know she was miserable because in chapter 2, when the spies made their way to her house, she told them, I know that the Lord is God and that He's going to deliver this land into your hands.

She was empty. She was wasted. She had tried it all and there was nothing there for her.

It's always been interesting to me that the Lord would lead the spies to her house. Out of all of the houses in Jericho, Hebrews tells us that she was the only believer. Everyone else was destroyed in Jericho because of unbelief, but Rahab was a believer.

Her heart was open. She was desperately, she was looking for light and truth. And out of all the men and women in Jericho, the spies arrived at her house, not by chance, but because God is committed to getting the truth to people whose hearts are open to respond to it.

And you know the story in chapter 2, how the spies made their way through the streets at night, perhaps dressed as Amorites, and they slipped into her house because perhaps they thought, at least their human thinking was, that they wouldn't be observed there, but God had purposed to get the truth to this woman. It's interesting that in this account, and only in this account, are these men described not only as spies, but also as messengers. Because they came bearing the good news.

The good news of freedom. True freedom. And she responded.

And you must on your own read chapter 2 to see the nature of her response. James says that her faith was real because she acted. She worked.

She did something. She acted in love toward these men. She hid them and turned away the city police who came to take them.

And then she let them over the wall at night, and they escaped into the mountains. And as they escaped, they promised that they would spare her in her house. So in the days that intervened, while Israel was gathering at Gilgal and making preparations for the siege, she gathered into her house her father and her mother and her brothers and sisters and all of her clan and protected them there.

And I'm sure she had a difficult time keeping them there, but evidently they were kept there until the invasion. In chapter 6, beginning with verse 6, you have an account of the actual invasion. And seen from Rahab's point of view, that must have been rather startling.

I don't believe that the Jerichoites were standing on the walls hurling taunts at the Israelites. The passage says they were frightened out of their wits. I think there was a stony silence as they watched the Israelites approach.

And we know that the Israelites were silent as they marched around the city. And I'm sure Rahab must have watched them as they made their way from Gilgal up the long slope up to Jericho and then circled the city. It would take about an hour and a half to walk around the city, blowing their horns, absolutely silent.

Then they returned to Gilgal. And I'm sure Rahab must have thought, well, they're probably just making a reconnaissance. Tomorrow they'll be back.

And she waited for deliverance the next day. But the next day they made their way up the long slope again and made the circuit and they went back. And I'm sure Rahab thought, what in the world is going on here? I thought this was the day.

And the third day the same thing happened. And the fourth day and the fifth day. And I'm sure by this time everyone in her house was getting restless and thinking it's silly to stay here because those people are no threat to us.

And perhaps even Rahab had a little uneasiness in her mind whether she wanted to be identified with a God who did things that way. No siege works, no battering rams. They're just marching around blowing

horns.

A little embarrassing to explain that to your neighbors and friends. But on the seventh day, early in the morning, they left Gilgal and they began to march around the city. And they marched around the city, as you know, seven times.

And the final circuit of the city was climaxed by a shout, a victory shout that preceded the actual victory. They were claiming a victory before it even occurred. And as you know, the city fell.

Her house was located on the city wall. And I've often wondered what happened to her house? Was it the only house remaining and the rest of the city wall fell around her? We don't know exactly what occurred, but she was spared. And the Israelites swept through the city and they destroyed everything.

In chapter 6, verse 21, we read, 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 the next line reads, And they gave them rest outside the camp of Israel. They let them rest.

But 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 treasure 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 see some progress in this acceptance of Rahab into the midst of the nation. At first she camped outside the tents of Israel because I think they didn't know what to do with her.

She was probably still dressed like a harlot, painted. Her language was probably coarse and vulgar and crude. And they just didn't know how to approach her.

But it wasn't long before she was accepted right into the nation. And the final note on Rahab's life in this chapter is that she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, whatever day that was. The lifetime of the eyewitness of this account or the time when these accounts were collected and written down.

She was accepted. Robert Frost says about the human family, one thing about the family is that they have to take you in. And you see, that's what's true of God's family as well.

They have to take you in. Because we belong to one another. And we may not all dress alike.

Some of us may have checkered backgrounds, things in our past that we're ashamed of, embarrassing things, things that cause uneasiness to us and to those that are associated with us. And maybe our language hasn't been cleaned up yet. And the patterns of our life are controlled in some measure by our past because we haven't yet fully learned or acted on the freedom that we have in Christ.

But we can accept one another and love one another despite the past. Because God accepts us. God forgives us.

This woman with her past was no problem to God. Her past was always there to the end of her days. She's referred to throughout Scripture as Rahab the harlot.

She's never called Rahab the ex-harlot. She had a past. She couldn't blot out the past.

But you see, it didn't make any difference. It didn't matter. She was accepted and a beloved.

The interesting thing about Rahab, she married a young man by the name of Salmon, a Jew. Jewish tradition tells us that he was one of the spies. Didn't that make a neat love story? We don't know for sure.

But she was accepted into a family. She was loved by a Jewish man. You know who her son was? It was Boaz.

And if you know anything of the story of Ruth, you know with what integrity Boaz dealt with Ruth. How he protected her and preserved her and how mature and loving and gracious he was toward Ruth. A girl he could have taken advantage of at any time.

Where did Boaz learn that? He learned it from his mother. Rahab the harlot. His heart was changed.

You see, not only was she forgiven her past, but she was given an entirely new life, a new power for living. And of course, we know that she's in the line, the genealogies that lead down to our Lord. She's one of the few women mentioned, along with Ruth and Mary, who are in the Lord's line.

Now isn't that remarkable? It's there, I'm convinced, because God wants us to know that though our past may make us ashamed, we may be embarrassed of our past, and it may come back upon us and cause us grief. It doesn't matter. It doesn't make any difference.

If we belong to God, it's forgiven. Forgotten. Cut off from all of that.

And because God accepts us, we can accept one another on that basis. People don't have to live up to our expectations. We don't have to put people under law and say you've got to dress this way, you've got to act this way.

No, no. We have to accept one another. Love one another.

Forgive one another. And I'm sure throughout Rahab's lifetime as she walked in Israel, I'm sure she looked different to the end of her days. And old children would say, who is she? Hey, Dad.

Who is that woman? And the father would teach her about Rahab. And the principle, of course, is that of forgiveness. Total forgiveness.

You see, what God looks for is a broken and contrite spirit. He doesn't look for perfection. Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 21, who were so right, so correct, so proper, the harlots will get into the kingdom of heaven before you.

Because their hearts were wrong. But here's a woman whose life is broken and crushed, who's wasted, but she had a broken and contrite spirit. She trusted in the Lord God of Israel.

She was forgiven. She was included right in the family. And her life began to change from that point on.

And she was a monument. This person was a monument to the grace of God. Do you realize that's what God wants us to be? Monuments to His forgiveness and His grace.

So Rahab was. She was accepted by God. And she was accepted by God's people.

And Paul says, Let us be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us. You see, the measure of acceptance that we extend to others and forgiveness that we give to others is a measure of forgiveness that we understand, that we've received from God. When we understand how much we've been forgiven, then we can forgive anyone, anything.

Now, we need to practice that in our homes. I do. To sweep out the old grudges, the resentments, the bitterness, the unforgiving spirit that we have toward one another because we've been wrong.

And I'm sure that we as parents have wronged our children many times. Many times. Do you realize in this passage how bitter this generation that came into the land could have been toward their fathers and mothers? Do you realize that? Through no fault of their own, they were delayed for 40 years, had to live in that miserable wilderness because of the unbelief of their parents.

But there's no hint of bitterness because God is committed to getting them into the land, you see. And God has forgiven your parents. He has accepted them.

And we need to forgive them. Whatever wrong they may have done to us that somehow has slowed us down spiritually, we feel, or inhibited us, we can be forgiving. And we as parents can be forgiving toward our children because we understand the measure of forgiveness that we've received from God.

Now, that's Rahab. And she stands in Israel as a monument to the grace of God. Let's stand together, shall we? Father, we can identify so easily with Rahab and the shame that can often overcome us, the guilt of the past and perhaps even the guilt of yesterday.

And we thank You that we walk in a forgiven state, that we're accepted, and that You love us, and that You're committed to perfecting in us Your purposes. And give us that same gentleness and acceptance and forgiveness of others. We ask these things in Christ's name.

Amen.

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