

(04-12-26)

God, Are You On My Side?

Joshua 5:10-15

University of Michigan

The Michigan basketball team won the national championship against the University of Connecticut last Monday. I heard that it was a very close game: 69 to 63. Have you thought about what would happen if the Christian players on both teams prayed to God for their victory?

What about an ice hockey game between the United States and Canada? If people in both nations pray for victory, which team will God allow to win? Can God's power be used for the benefit of the teams we love and support, and will He answer those prayers?

I think today's Scripture can answer these questions.
Let me share the context of today's Scripture.

Crossing the Jordan River

After forty years of life in the wilderness, the Israelites just crossed the Jordan River. It was a miracle designed by God so that the Israelites could remember who God was to them. Their crossing took place in spring during the barley and flax harvest season. It was a time when the Jordan River was at flood stage. This meant that they had to trust God and their leader, Joshua, to go through a torrent that was violent, deep, and wide. Joshua commanded the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant to lead the way. The miracle didn't happen until the priests actually touched the edge of the water. The water flowing from upstream stopped and piled up "in a heap" far away at a town called Adam. The water flowing down to the Dead Sea was completely cut off.

It was a wonderful reminder for the Israelites that they had to completely trust God to experience God's miracles and God's promises. Also, they must have remembered the time of Exodus when their ancestors crossed the Red Sea. It was an act of God's salvation for the Israelites. After forty years, they encountered God, who was their salvation in the past, present, and future.

Now they were encamped **at Gilgal**, standing on the edge of the Promised Land with the fortified city of Jericho in their sights.

Circumcision of the Israelites

God commanded Joshua to make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites who were born in the wilderness. Circumcision required several days of recovery, but

they were now in their enemies' territory. So it was a radical act of obedience and trust in God as they followed God's command. Circumcision was a ritual that confirmed their identity as God's covenant people, an assurance of God's presence with His people. God said, **"Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.' And so that place is called Gilgal to this day."** (Joshua 5:9).

"The disgrace of Egypt" likely refers to Israel's slavery in Egypt and their lack of faith during the wilderness. By being circumcised, they could confirm their identity and restart their new lives as God's covenant people. The place was named Gilgal, which sounds like the Hebrew word for "rolling."

Celebration of the Passover

The Israelites observed the Passover 38 years ago, one year after the original Passover, while at Mt. Sinai. Now, at Gilgal in the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover. This was because to eat the Passover meal, you were required to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). That was why they hadn't observed the Passover in the wilderness.

Now they are circumcised as God's covenant people and celebrate the Passover, remembering God's salvation for Israel. They are ready to go out to destroy their enemies and occupy the Promised Land.

However, Joshua encountered a man standing before him with a drawn sword. Joshua came to the man and asked, **"Are you one of us or one of our adversaries?"** (Joshua 5:13). Joshua wanted to know if the man was on Israel's side or their enemies' side.

The man answered, **"Neither, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come"** (Joshua 5:14). This was not the answer Joshua expected. At this point, all the males born in the wilderness had been circumcised, and they had celebrated the Passover as God's covenant people. Surely, God had to be with them. Israel knew their God more than any other nation in the world.

The title **"commander of the army of the Lord"** appears only here and in Daniel 8:11 in the Bible. It refers to God Himself. Commentators believe that Joshua was inspecting near Jericho, which was only about two miles from Gilgal. He was evidently planning his strategy before attacking Jericho.

However, when he encountered God, he learned that instead of asking, "Are you on my side?" we have to be on God's side. We have to be humble before God and obey God's will. That is the meaning of being God's covenant people. It was a special teaching from God, not only to Joshua and the Israelites, but also to all

of us, His covenant people, that we must follow God and acknowledge that God is in charge. We must be humble and obedient as God's covenant people.

I remember when I was in high school and college, Korean pastors would say that God is using and will continually use the Korean churches as the spiritual eldest son among the Christian brothers and sisters to fulfill His plan to evangelize the world. When I participated in revival meetings at that time, this kind of message was prevalent in the churches.

I can say that that's not true at all. It was an arrogant message, not acknowledging that our God is a God of all nations, languages, and peoples. As God's covenant people, we have to be humble and obedient at all costs and in all situations so that we can participate in God's carrying out His plan of redemption of the world.

That is why Jesus Christ taught his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, which is the Kingdom Prayer. "Your Kingdom Come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10 NIV).

I believe that instead of asking if God is on our side, we have to follow Joshua's response to God in today's Scripture.

"And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, 'What do you command your servant, my lord?'" (Joshua 5:14).

Worship is a listening heart toward God. Worship is our obedience to God (1 Sam. 15:22). Joshua recognized, "I am not the commander. The real commander is God Himself. I am just God's servant." At the same time, it was a clear message from God to all of God's servants: "Put down the resources you depend on before you carry out your plan. Instead, be humble before me and obey my will. Ask yourself if you are on my side completely and fully." That is why Joshua could show his humility before God and was ready to obey God's command.

Then Joshua got this message from God: "The commander of the army of the Lord said to Joshua, 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.' And Joshua did so" (Joshua 5:15).

This last verse reminds us of Moses' encounter with God through the burning bush in Mt. Horeb (or Mt. Sinai). Moses and Joshua received the same message from God as they were to fulfill His plan.

Before we ask if God is on our side, we must check out our spiritual state if we are revealing God's holiness. Our battles belong to God, which means as we

reveal God's holiness, we can experience God's power and transformation in and through us for the world.

Here, God reminds Joshua of Israel's identity as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, just as He did before giving the Ten Commandments to Israel.

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5-6 NIV).

That is the way of Jesus Christ, which we have to remember, resemble, and follow:

“And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:7-11).