

Truth for Today

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Old Testament appearances of Jesus - The appearance to Joshua

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son”. So we read in Hebrews 1:1-2.

God has progressively revealed Himself to men. He has gradually made Himself known, steadily, increasingly, more and more. Finally, He has fully revealed Himself, made Himself fully known, in the Person of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. As we learn from John 1:18: “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”

Superimposed on that gradual development of revelation, from time to time God has made Himself known in a very special way to particular individuals, for specific purposes, to equip them for special jobs He required them to do for Him. He did this by appearing to them in a special, miraculous form. This was to help them to a better understanding of some special attribute or quality of Himself. It gave them what they needed for the job that He had selected them to do.

1 Timothy 6:16 says: “God only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see” The glory of the Infinite God is so bright, so intense, that man, being a mere creature, would be shrivelled up instantaneously if he were to be ushered into His immediate presence. For this reason, on these special instances when God appeared to men to commission them to undertake some extraordinary service for Him, He necessarily, for their material preservation, appeared to them in a form they were capable of recognising, and yet which their systems were able to tolerate, without their being instantly combusted into material oblivion.

Throughout the Old Testament, we find that on these special occasions the Lord appeared to men as an angel or as a man, through visions or actually. In each case, we are made aware of the identity of the man or angel in one way or another. Sometimes, the angel or man spoke, and identified himself. At other times we need to note the response accorded to such an appearing. When an actual angel appeared to a man and was offered worship, the angel rejected the worship as being entirely inappropriate. However, when it was the Lord Himself, appearing as an angel, the worship was accepted. These very special Appearances of God are commonly called, collectively, Theophanies, or Theophanic Revelations.

Joshua is our subject today. But, it is inevitable that from time to time we shall compare Joshua with Moses, Joshua's mentor and patron. Moses had been used of God to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness, to the very brink of the promised land of Canaan. For reasons we need not consider now, it was not given to Moses to complete the job by taking the people of Israel into Canaan. That very special commission was kept in reserve for Joshua. It is relevant, nevertheless, to think back to the way in which Moses himself was called of God to be the leader of God's earthly people.

After the people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years, God delivered them out of the clutches of Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. He then guided them through the wilderness for a long, testing period of 40 years. For that period, God appointed Moses as His spokesman to and leader of His earthly people. That time expired. The moment had come for God to bring them into their own eventual homeland, in what we now call Palestine. To achieve that, it was appropriate for God, at that stage, to bring in another leader, Joshua. He was to take the place of Moses, who had done a tremendous job in leading God's earthly people for those 40 years. A new phase in the life of the nation required a new leader. It was time for someone else, Joshua, to take over the new responsibility of conducting God's people into the Promised Land.

What do we actually know about Joshua? The first we hear about him is given in Exodus 17:9. When battle was about to be joined with Amalek, Moses singled out Joshua and said to him, “Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek: tomorrow, I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in mine hand.” The rod was the symbol of the sovereign choice and power of God and of Moses as His appointed leader. Moses prayed while Joshua and the people fought. The battle with Amalek was engaged in accordance with Moses' instructions and duly won. Joshua learned, that day, that intercession with God is a vital precursor to real victory over the enemies of God and His people.

Also, we read in Numbers 13 and 14 that at the beginning of the wilderness journey, Moses had singled out a representative from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. He commissioned them to spy out The Promised Land in advance of the whole nation venturing on the next phase of their journey towards Canaan. Moses instructed the spies to report back to him what the prospects were. Out of the twelve spies, only two came back with a positive, favourable report about what they had seen. Only Joshua and Caleb were willing to look at God's wonderful provision, rather than the size and number of the enemies. In token of their faithfulness, and faith, God promised that He would eventually bring both of them safely into Canaan. And He did! God is no man's debtor. Out of about six hundred thousand adult men whom God delivered out of slavery in Egypt, only those two, Joshua and Caleb, gained entry into the promised land of Canaan. In all this, Joshua gained valuable personal experience.

When major crises came, the moral strength that had been tested, proven to be true, and developed, stood Joshua in good stead. Each victory gained with the help of God, each step, however short, taken in faith, gives added moral strength to face the next test that will surely come along. As the little hymn says: "Each victory will help you, some other to win". So it was with Joshua. When the time finally came to enter into the national inheritance, Joshua did not waver. On the other hand, not only the ten pessimistic spies, but also all the rest of the adult men who came out of Egypt, perished in the wilderness. Scripture says specifically that this was because of their unbelief (Hebrews 3:17-19).

So then, when the moment arrived for Moses to appoint and announce a successor to himself, there was no doubt at all in his mind who the appropriate person should be. In any case, the instruction of God was quite clear. "And the Lord said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him" (Numbers 27:18). And again, in Deuteronomy 1:38, "Joshua the son of Nun, which standeth before thee, he shall go in thither. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit (the Land)." Then, when Moses died, God said to Joshua, "Moses, My servant is dead ... As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee" (Joshua 1:1 and 5).

So much for the call of Joshua. Let us now turn to Joshua 5:1-15, to hear of the way in which God appeared to Joshua, to fit him for the major task of leading the nation into the promised land of Canaan. There is a sequence here, prior to and leading up to the Theophany, that we do well to notice and consider well. Firstly, the ceremonial rite of Circumcision. Secondly, the celebration of The Passover. Thirdly, the provision of The Old Corn of the Land. Fourthly, the cessation of the Manna. These events actually happened in the history of the nation of Israel. They also have a spiritual and moral significance for Christians at the present time. Let us look at them one by one.

Circumcision is a clean cut, a complete cutting off. For Israelites, circumcision was the recognition that God had cut them off completely from the old life of slavery and bondage in Egypt. They were to enter into a new life of blessing in dependence upon God. For the Christian, we need to look at Colossians 2:11, which says, "in (Christ) also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands in the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ." The application is clear. Sin and Satan no longer have any real claim on the Christian. Why not? Because, in the sight of God, the Christian has been cut off completely from his sins, and the penalty due because of them. This is not in virtue of anything the Christian is in himself or anything he has done for himself. The cutting off is in virtue of the cutting off of Christ, in death, upon the cross of Calvary. Does scripture say so? Yes, indeed! Remember Psalm 102:24, "Take me not away (cut me not off) in the midst of my days." This was the cry prophetically attributed to the Lord as He anticipated the cross. He prayed, "Father save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy Name." (John 12:27-28) But scripture had already said prophetically in Isaiah 53:8, "He was cut off out of the land of the living." Then, Daniel 9:26 says, "Messiah shall be cut off." So, in God's judgement, all who trust Christ as Saviour have been cut off, severed completely, by God, from all fear of penalty for their sins. Colossians 2:11 could well be translated, "You are cut off from the judgement of God because Christ was cut off in death on your behalf at Calvary." Christ has borne the burden, paid the price, discharged the debt, accepted the punishment on their behalf. There is now no fear of judgement for those who trust in Christ.

For Israel, The Passover was a unique feast on the eve of their departure out of Egypt. It was a symbol of the basis of their deliverance out of the clutches of Pharaoh, in virtue of the shedding of the blood of the Passover Lamb on their behalf. It was also a special first taste of good, wholesome food to set the pilgrims off on their journey through the wilderness. For us, the death of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the Cross is the guarantee that God has cleared us forever from the judgment of God. He has delivered us from the thralldom of Satan. In answer to that, the knowledge and understanding of the significance of the once and for all sacrifice of Christ, in death, is intended to affect every day of our lives, just as for Israel the one day Passover merged into the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread.

For Israel, the manna gave them sustenance for the journey, through the wilderness, day by day. Steady, unspectacular, but nonetheless miraculous provision. We, too, in our day, must feed on Christ from the scriptures, day by day, for our spiritual sustenance.

When the people of God reached the Promised Land of Canaan, they found that there was already there suitable food for them to eat, called The Old Corn of the Land. They had neither sown nor nurtured it. It was there before they were, the result of someone else's work. Food to sustain enjoyment of the good land into which God has brought His people! There was no further need for the miraculous, daily provision of manna. For us, God has provided heavenly, spiritual food for us, the enjoyment of the knowledge of Christ in glory, even now, long before we ourselves get there.

In addition, it was when Joshua was near the enemy and engaged in service for God that the Lord met and spoke with him. We get the statement in Joshua 5:13 "And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand." Jericho was the stronghold of the enemy. How encouraging it must have been for Joshua to have the Lord appear to him in the shadow of that great obstacle to eventual progress. The man who appeared to Joshua was undoubtedly the Lord Himself.

These points are most instructive when the experience of the Christian is considered. It may be that a believer seeks or even expects a personal revelation from the Lord as a first step in spiritual experience. He needs to know that can only follow a true appreciation of the sacrifice in death of the Lord Jesus, which in turn regulates and controls his lifestyle. There are no short cuts in the Christian life. We have to recognise that all blessing, and indeed all justice, has its basis and foundation in the value to God of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The appearance of the Lord to Joshua was both timely and fitting. The Lord knew His servant. At the appropriate moment, He gave him the encouragement that he needed. It was just as the Lord had promised him before the River Jordan was crossed. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, or forsake thee" (Joshua 1:5). Joshua was about to lead an army into battle. He was given the Lord's promise of victory. On the very eve of the conflict he received a revelation of the Lord as the "captain of the host of the Lord" (5:14). It had been the same with Moses. He was commissioned to go in before Pharaoh and perform miracles. But, first, "the angel of the Lord appeared unto Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, but was not consumed" (Exodus 3:2). Joshua was granted a revelation of the Lord as "Captain" (Commander) of the armies of heaven. What a tremendous encouragement for Joshua on the eve of a crucial battle! As with Moses, and then with Joshua, so it can be with us. He still brings appropriate encouragement to His people in the different circumstances of life and in the trials and tribulations which they experience. The believer can always find encouragement in the Lord, as a revelation of Him is gained through the scriptures.

To keep the balance, Joshua was then reminded of the holiness of the Lord. "And the captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so" (5:15). The promise of victory was bound up with the acknowledgement of the holiness of the Lord. It does not matter where the believer finds himself in his experience of the Lord. Holiness must govern his life and service for his Lord and Master. This lesson was stressed to Moses at the bush, and Joshua was reminded of the same. Both Moses and Joshua were on the verge of doing great things for God, but their service had to be based on the acknowledgement in their lives of the holiness of the Lord. And so it is that the last recorded injunction to Joshua, before the Lord gave instructions for the conquest of Jericho, are to acknowledge and be subject to the holiness of the Lord. The New Testament message is equally clear in 1 Peter 1:15. "As he that hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation".

Let us learn the lessons from Joshua and seek grace from the Lord to follow His excellent example.

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