

# Fourth Sunday in Lent

## DIETS

Joshua 5:9-12

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

9 The Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.' And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. 10 While the Israelites were encamped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Produce of the Land

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *Jaded Palates*

"Look, kids, real food! No more of that what-is-it mystery stuff (Ex. 16:15). So tired it was, so old, so boring" (Num. 11:6). With that, the collective sigh of relief starts gusting like a mighty wind across those plains of Jericho where Israel now sprawls (v. 10). Have we not felt eddies of this same wind in the assorted encampments of New Israel that Christians occupy? "Hey, kids, a real message for once! Something we can sink our teeth into, something besides that faith-in-Jesus mystery stuff (same old, same old) that the guy's been feeding us till we can hardly palate it anymore. Instead, at last, some real-life

instruction that down-to-earth folks like us can use to make our lives better, glorify God, and improve the world!" And will "the guy" (a former preacher perhaps), feel somehow disrespected by sentiments like these? He ought to. He is. And so is the God who sent him to do the preaching.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Taste for Glory***

Why this zest for real food, so-called, whether "crops of the land" (v. 12) or tips for righteous living? Is it merely a matter of taste, or a hankering of the heart? Consider: not once in all those desert years was a father, sitting at the dinner table, able to look the kids in the eye and say, "We provided this, your Mom and I, my sweaty brow, her long, dogged hours; parents be praised." Disgraceful, isn't it, to be always on the dole, ever the recipient of another's largesse? Or to sit there Sunday after Sunday hearing the kids be told that the grace by which alone they live isn't dad's or mom's but Someone Else's? Just so is dad dis-graced; dis-credited too, all bragging rights shifted from him to Someone Else, and that tastes bitter. How delicious by contrast is the food of credit taken: "I picked that grain, I ground the flour, I made the bread." Or again, "I'm the gracious parent/friend/neighbor who, cooperating with the God of grace, is giving you the good life, kids." Hence the demand: "Your turn, preacher. Teach me. Instruct me. Show me how to grow those crops, to do the stuff that will let me say what I ache to say, 'glory be to God,' of course, but 'glory be to me as well.'" Or, as Star Trek's Captain Kirk might say, "Grace me up, Scottie!"

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Eating Dirt***

Grace demands power. You can't be a credit-taking provider without having what it takes to produce what you aim to give. Newly arriving, crop-growing Israel will learn this all too quickly in the fields and vineyards of Canaan. But credit is

like a narcotic. Once taken it isn't lightly given up. So when the pinch of drought arrives Israel will make his own choice, thank you, about where to turn for help, the thought being that if and when the help arrives he'll still get the credit for pulling the right strings in the right places. Thus the plunge in coming decades and centuries toward Canaan's disgrace, the worship of Baal and all his supposed works. Thus too the incessant dalliance of today's church-goer with the American disgrace, that worship among us of the gods and gurus of self-help and self-determination, or those other gods that lurk behind secular labels like The Market or The Democratic Process. Of course, God, finding this disgraceful, will respond at length by dis-gracing us as we've never been dis-graced before, his favor withdrawn, his power turned against us. So Joshua will warn (24:20). So Israel will discover when it flouts the warning. So we keep learning as our cemeteries fill, also with Christian corpses, each sunk by God's decree in the worst disgrace of them all, namely Adam's ("dust you are," etc., Gen. 3:19).

## **PROGNOSIS: More Manna**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *The Promised Dirt Eater*

But hasn't this dis-gracing God just kept a promise (Ex. 3:7-8) to spring his people from "the disgrace of Egypt" (v. 9), a shame that his own providing had sucked them into (Gen. 50:18-20)? How can he be content with losing them now to subsequent disgraces? He won't be, of course, a point underscored by the passover that Israel is keeping at Gilgal (v. 10), the first ever on the western bank of the Jordan. It brings to mind that the land they're keeping the passover in is the land of God's promise, and this in a double sense. Not only did God promise the land (Ex. 12:25), but in this land God's promise will grow, ripen, and rule as God's final word addressed at last

not only to disgraced Israelites but to shameful Canaanites as well, to say nothing of disgraceful Americans. See Isaiah 25:6-9 where the promise is in full bloom, calling to mind (as we think on it now) that other passover when God disgraced himself with our shame worn and borne in Christ crucified. To what end? So that the ultimate promise might spring into view on the third day, that Easter morning when the stone was “rolled away” (v. 9) from Jesus’ tomb and with it the disgrace of dead-and-dusty Adam that weighs on us all.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Taste for Mystery**

Comes the key question: Will Israel trust the promising God? Will we? Or, as Joshua puts it at Shechem in his final address to Israel, Will we “revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness” (24:14), by which he means a continued, unwavering reliance on the Lord as gracious provider, defender, and remover of disgrace? To elicit that trust, Joshua devotes his sermon to a rehearsal of God’s gracious acting on Israel’s behalf from Abraham’s days in Haran until now, underscoring throughout that God has been and still is the Actor to whom all credit is due (24:1-13). Note in particular how he underscores the truth that everything Israel enjoys at the moment is there for them as sheer gift (24:13). Note even more the principle at work in this preaching, how memory is the engine of trust, God himself entrusting the health of his people’s hearts to the power of his deeds recounted. Thanks be to God, then, for the double remembering we get to do in our 21st-century assemblies, the one sparked by words, the other by the wondrous gift of the New Manna, that mystery-food “instituted by Christ himself for us to eat and drink” (Luther, Small Catechism), by which memory is transformed into the life-giving presence of the One remembered. So it is that the dis-graced get re-graced, over and over. And if attention gets paid at the re-gracing, then yes,

the itch for self-credit will be quieted and soothed, this shame too rolled away and forgotten as glory is given to Christ and the Father who sent him.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Yearning Palates***

What then is “real food”? Not the stuff we thought it was, obviously. One assumes that at least some of those who feasted at Gilgal (v. 10) were alive to this. They noticed, that is, that however “real” the parched grain seemed, it was only a first, tentative taste of Reality-To-Be, the one that God had long ago invited Abraham to imagine and hang his heart on. They’re not there yet. Far from it, in fact. Those in Israel who do notice this will continue with Joshua and his house to “serve the Lord” (24:15) as ongoing promise-trusters, and in their trusting will emerge as the conduit of blessing for “all the families of the earth.” That’s what God has meant for them to be all along (Gen. 12:3). And that’s what they become. God’s first Christian preachers will give them constant credit for abetting the mighty works of God and blessing us (see Hebrews 11, for example). The point? It’s our turn now; our turn, that is, to fixate on the future and keep a tenacious grip on the promise of Reality-To-Be in Christ, a smacking great feast and a brilliant life intended not only for the trusting ethnic few but for any and every one who dares to trust as well. To remember that—to spend our days with that all-embracing future in view—is to serve God, and to abet his mission, and to bless our jaded neighbors with a better food, a better hope, than anything they’ve known in their meager lives thus far.