

INCREASING OUR CHRISTIAN FOOTPRINT

CHAPTER ONE: FIRST STEPS

When we say ‘step on it!,’ we’re usually intending someone to hurry up by asking them to imagine they’re stepping on a ‘go faster’ pedal like the accelerator pedal in our car. ‘Put your foot down,’ is another expression we like to use when we’re encouraging someone to stamp their authority on a situation – perhaps to take control of misbehaving children. But stepping onto a piece of land, or putting one’s foot on it so as to walk over it, already had an understood meaning from ancient Bible times. Let’s rewind back to very early in the Bible, to the time of Abraham in fact – so we’re talking some 2000 years before the birth of Christ. What follows is set in the period of Abraham’s early life when his name was still Abram.

Abram encountered the God of heaven, the God of glory, when he was a city-dweller. Yes, Abram lived in what has become known to us as ‘the fertile crescent’ – in the famous city of Ur of the Chaldees where the populace worshiped the moon. Abram’s life was never the same after that encounter with the God of the Bible. He abandoned city life altogether to become a wanderer – a wanderer with God. He didn’t need to know where he was going, he implicitly trusted the God who’d said to him: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:1-2).

Abram obeyed, and so he went, trusting the promise of the God who’d turned him away from all his idols in the vividness of that epic encounter in Mesopotamia. Abram came into the land of Canaan, and then spent a short time in Egypt. On his return to the land of God’s promise, in Genesis 13:17, God told Abram: “walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.” Now, we hear those words and we’re tempted to think about an enjoyable stroll in the countryside, taking in the beauty of the land. But the sense of this command conveys much more intention than that. Walking about like that on the land back then would seem to symbolize legal ownership. The background for saying this can be found in early Egyptian and Hittite empires, where the king would take a periodic ceremonial walk around a field or a tour of his realm in order to symbolize the

renewal of his sovereignty over the land. Doesn't it seem like something similar here in the case of Abraham?

In fact, in one Mesopotamian city east of the Tigris River (Nuzi), property was once transferred from one person to another by the former owner lifting his foot from his property and placing the new owner's foot on it – all at the same time a deed was drawn up. This action with the foot symbolized a legal property transaction. I would imagine this is equally the thought behind what we find in Psalm 60: “God has spoken in his holiness: “With exultation I will divide up Shechem and portion out the Vale of Succoth. Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet; Judah is my scepter. Moab is my washbasin; upon Edom I cast my shoe; over Philistia I shout in triumph” (Psalm 60:6-8).

In the clear context of ownership there, it's entirely reasonable that the throwing of the shoe over the land of Edom was a token of possessing it or taking ownership of Edom's territory. Perhaps there's some connection with how we're also told in the Bible book of Joshua, in chapter 6 in fact, in the part concerning the capture of the city of Jericho with its famous walls – we're told that all the Israelite warriors were commanded to “march around the city seven times”. I wonder if this kind of ceremonial marching around the city might have indicated in the culture of those times - and especially to the inhabitants of Jericho - that the Israelites were laying claim to their city. After the seventh day of marching around the city, the Israelites invaded and captured it with God's supernatural intervention. When the Israelites captured kings as well as cities, trampling them underfoot was something we read about, for example in Joshua 10:

“So Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to the camp at Gilgal. These five kings fled and hid themselves in the cave at Makkedah. And it was told to Joshua, “The five kings have been found, hidden in the cave at Makkedah.” And Joshua said, “Roll large stones against the mouth of the cave and set men by it to guard them, but do not stay there yourselves. Pursue your enemies; attack their rear guard. Do not let them enter their cities, for the LORD your God has given them into your hand.” When Joshua and the sons of Israel had finished striking them with a great blow until they were wiped out, and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the fortified cities, then all the people returned safe to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah. Not a man moved his tongue against

any of the people of Israel. Then Joshua said, "Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me from the cave." And they did so, and brought those five kings out to him from the cave, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon. And when they brought those kings out to Joshua, Joshua summoned all the men of Israel and said to the chiefs of the men of war who had gone with him, "Come near; put your feet on the necks of these kings." Then they came near and put their feet on their necks. And Joshua said to them, "Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous. For thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight" (Joshua 10:15-25).

Back, even before that, in Deuteronomy 11:24, a similar idea had been presented on the eve of the conquest of Canaan. This was after the time when the Israelites been slaves in Egypt. Here we are now at a timepoint some 600 years after Abraham. This was when God told the Israelites through Moses, "Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours." The Hebrew term translated as 'tread' in verse 24 relates to the setting of one's foot on territory or even on objects so as to take ownership. That's the clear sense of the biblical language here: the land trodden under their feet was land that was to become theirs. We're learning that this symbolic, or ceremonial act, is used throughout the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua with reference to taking possession of the Promised Land. Tantalizingly, for the theme we hope to develop in the present study, those earlier mentioned verses from Deuteronomy also contain the very first brief mention of a 'Gilgal' in the Bible – and, if you noticed earlier, there was also another mention of a Gilgal at the start of the story about the defeat of the kings in Joshua.

Again, if you were listening really carefully, you'd have noticed that I said 'a Gilgal' then, and not simply Gilgal, as you might expect me to say if it's the name of a town. I said that because recent archaeological discoveries in the Jordan Valley - and in the adjoining hills of Samaria - would appear to indicate that as Israel took possession of the land, they tended to mark ownership of it by building structures that actually resemble a large footprint to this day. These unusual structures, were referred to as 'gilgals,' and consist of two enclosed circles of stones sharing a common border and joined together in such a way so as to form the shape of a giant footprint. One university professor from Haifa

claims that these 'foot' structures found in the Jordan Valley may very well be the first sites that the people of Israel built upon entering Canaan and testify to the biblical concept of staking ownership of the land with one's foot.

Consistent with how they seem to symbolize ownership and possession, these 'circles of stones' also visually reflect the general meaning of the Hebrew term 'gilgal.' Even though the sites are not technically circular overall, they did once have smaller circular arrangements of stone within them - stone circles that were probably used for ceremonial purposes. The overall effect therefore invokes the idea of circles, represented by the Hebrew word *gilgal*. Six gilgal sites like this, with the massive foot-shaped structure, have been discovered so far.

Of course, it should be said that the Bible doesn't make any specific mention of foot-shaped sites. But it's perfectly possible that these foot-shaped stone sites, perhaps built by the Israelites during this time period, were intended as symbols of their declaration of ownership and control of the land, and anticipated their defeat of its previous inhabitants. And we don't know how many gilgals there were in the Bible, or exactly where any of them were. Although not explicitly mentioned in the biblical text, one has been identified in close proximity to the place of Jacob's wrestling with the awesome stranger at the fords of the Jabbok. Another different one features repeatedly from the time of Joshua through to beyond the time of king David and later prophets. By recalling significant events which happened at these 'gilgal' sites, I want us to be challenged throughout this book to 'increase our Christian footprint' in our walk with God. The events we'll review will be applied to our:

1. Standing in the presence of God, in brotherly peace, on the promises of our birthright;
2. Taking ground in the Christian's spiritual warfare;
3. Stepping out in full obedience of all the will of God for our lives;
4. Gaining a foothold from which to taste the powers of the age to come.

I do hope you'll join with us in the rest of this book. And do bring along your walking boots!

CHAPTER TWO: POSSESSING THE PROMISES AND BLESSINGS

We've been learning that the name 'Gilgal' wasn't originally a specific place-name as such, but it was a term used for circular stone enclosures which, taken together, gave the shape of a giant foot. Benjamin Mazar of the Hebrew University believes he's identified the biblical valley of Succoth with the point where the Jabbok River enters the Jordan. If that's correct, it's exactly opposite a wadi known as Wadi Far'ah. And near to that wadi, you'll find a gilgal site enclosed by a wall. It's on an oval hill overlooking the wadi, and it may be the Gilgal that gets a mention in Deuteronomy 11:30. That particular gilgal is the one used to locate Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, and the ribbon of greenery behind the mentioned oval hill marks the course of the fertile wadi linking the sites of Shechem and Mt. Ebal to the Jordan River.

Not only does this discovery near to the Jabbok river appear to be one of these gilgal stone structures, but it contains pottery just like pottery coming from the excavation of the altar on Mt. Ebal – and this fact supports the idea that this gilgal site was a fortified camp dating back to the period of Israel's earliest history in the land of Canaan. It does seem reasonable to think of these gilgals - or, if you like, these footprints - as having the purpose of symbolically representing God's people, under Joshua's leadership, taking ownership of the land of Canaan as their Promised Land by setting their foot on it.

In Deuteronomy 11:30, after describing how the blessings should be pronounced on Mt. Gerizim and the curses on Mt. Ebal, the Bible text locates these two well-known mountains with the words: "Are [Gerizim and Ebal] not on the other side [of the] Jordan, by the way where the sun goes down [west], in the land of the Canaanites that dwell in the country over against Gilgal." This description refers to the west side of the Jordan. Seen from the heights of Gilead, the sun sets in the west, beyond the pass through the Wadi Far'ah. 'Over against Gilgal,' the text says. So, could the enclosure found by the university professor – which is only four miles from Mt. Ebal and Shechem – could it be

the northern Gilgal referred to in this verse? Experts tell us that there's no other site with better credentials.

There was a different gilgal, of course, one which lay in the neighborhood of Jericho, for we read: "The people came up from the Jordan ... and encamped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho" (Joshua 4:19). It was here that Joshua set up 12 stones to commemorate the Israelite people's successful crossing of the river Jordan. But the gilgal we began with, the one overlooking the Wadi Far'ah, is a different gilgal. It's up in the north, and this northern Gilgal is a rival (if you want to call it that) to the more famous southern Gilgal nearby Jericho.

Apparently, then, there were at least two Gilgals, a northern one and a southern one (as well as others), for as we are saying, it's long been recognized that 'Gilgal' is not a specific location, but a type of fortified camp. The large enclosure encircled by a wall nearly 6 feet wide – which is in all likelihood the northern gilgal - was discovered when surveying the southern side of the Wadi Far'ah, a major valley that leads from Shechem, Mt. Ebal and Tirzah down to the Jordan River. Since this gilgal is located close to the point where the Jabbok River enters the Jordan River, our thoughts turn to a Bible event which took place there. It concerns the patriarch, Jacob and how he obtained his father Isaac's blessing. Isaac should have known better than ever to promise his other son, Esau, the blessing. In his old age, we wonder if Isaac had forgotten what God had revealed to his wife Rebekah before the children were even born: namely that the elder would serve the younger? But here was Isaac promising to bless the elder! He would seemingly have made him Jacob's master according to the usual custom for the firstborn. But it was against God's expressed will for Esau to have this blessing.

But, equally, what were Rebekah and Jacob playing at? It could well be that, by contrast, they did have in mind God's word to them, but to use deceit ...? The end never justifies the means. This is a shabby episode in Jacob's life. If getting his older brother's birthright was by taking unfair advantage, this was worse - involving impersonation and downright lies to lay claim to the blessing that went along with the birthright. But you say, how could God have worked it out otherwise? We simply don't know, but this wasn't God's way.

Later, God would teach Jacob a lesson. It happened 20 years later when Jacob returned into the vicinity of the northern gilgal:

“Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh” (Genesis 32:24-31).

Having tricked his old, partially-sighted father in this way, Jacob had run off with the blessing which had belonged to his brother. But he’d have to reap what he’d sown – which included his own uncle cheating him time after time by short-changing him in his wages. Then one day, God told Jacob to go back home. It was on that return journey that a strange figure confronted him and began to wrestle with him. Could it be that Jacob was wrestling with God? What might God’s purpose have been in what we’d expect to be a totally one-sided contest? Was he coming down to Jacob’s level to teach him the most vital lesson of his life? It was one which he learned well, for this would become the turning-point of his life. This experience down by the fords of the Jabbok river, in the valley of Succoth, near to the wadi and the northern gilgal, in the shades of evening, would leave its mark on the rest of Jacob’s life. Jacob’s personal history to this point had been one of struggling with man and God in order to grab the things God had already planned to give him anyway.

By this time in life, he’d had personally revealed to him, the great promises which God had first made to his grandfather, Abraham. He believed them, yes, but he wasn’t content

to leave the outcome to God. No, he was always trying to make it happen. Even now in his struggle against the wrestler in the chasm, he says to God 'I will not let you go unless you bless me'. God then says to him 'What's your name?' Seems like an unusual question at that precise moment, doesn't it? - until we remember that Jacob had once tricked his own blind father – and deceived him into giving him a blessing by using his brother's name. His father had asked his name back then, and at that time Jacob had lied and said: 'Esau, my name's Esau'. But now, later, and alone with God, when God the all-seeing Father, the Father of all, asks him his name, he says: 'Jacob - it's Jacob'. I wonder, if in that split second, did Jacob think to himself: 'Ah, you've got me! – you've exposed my heart. It's true, the last time I asked someone for a blessing, I deceived him by giving a false name.' So Jacob realized the deceitfulness of his own heart, and his life was forever changed. For a start, he was reconciled with his brother Esau.

Like Jacob, deep in the chasm of the Jordan valley, we too, as Christians, may have encountered God maybe after some low point in our life, only to discover like him we'd been so blessed. Like Jacob, standing in the presence of God, and soon to be in peace with his brother Esau; we can legitimately - in Christ - lay claim to the promises of our spiritual birthright. And we, too, should be at peace with our Christian brothers: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it ... that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal" (Hebrews 12:14-16).

We're encouraged to pursue our spiritual birthright with the same kind of desire Jacob had for what it meant to him in his appreciation of God's purposes. But have we got our priorities right? I hope we're not to be compared with Esau. After this episode in his life, Jacob had a distinctive walk thanks to God's touch on his hip. But what he did was set foot more purposefully on the ground God wanted him to cover. Remember, the setting for this story is the northern gilgal, and its symbolism is all about taking possession of the land. Are we taking possession of our birthright blessings? Follow down the same Hebrews chapter and you come to the modern people of God at worship. Read it again, please, and consider it thoughtfully. Does our church experience match this – or do we have some ground to make up?

CHAPTER THREE: GAINING A FOOTHOLD

In April 2009, the University of Haifa in Israel issued a press release concerning archaeologist Adam Zertal's work, in which it was said that he'd discovered five huge stone-lined camps in the Jordan Valley, each in the shape of an enormous foot. Consistent with what we've already shared in this study, Zertal claims that in ancient times the foot was held to have great significance as a symbol of the ownership of territory; and control over an enemy.

The further suggestion is made that it was Joshua's army that built the various foot-shaped stone enclosures that have now been discovered in Palestine by Adam Zertal's team of archaeologists. Although, as we say, the enclosure is often foot-shaped, there are smaller stone circles inside them. This may suggest how Joshua had his men set up the twelve stones that they brought out of the river Jordan. It may well have been that they were arranged in a circle. The Bible doesn't say exactly how the twelve stones were arranged when they were set up – all it says is:

“Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan.” So Joshua commanded the priests, “Come up out of the Jordan.” And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before. The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the people of Israel, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground’” (Joshua 4:16-22).

This Gilgal was to be a place where Israel came to remember the mighty works of God. Let's remain a little longer at this point where the Israelites crossed over the Jordan, and made their first footfall in the land of promise. The journey to get there had taken over forty years. Where exactly was it where they entered the land? Well, one of those massive

footprints can today be found (at Bedhat esh-Sha'ab) located in the Jordan Valley and it's thought by some that this is the Gilgal site where Israel initially encamped after crossing the Jordan and setting foot upon the land of promise for the very first time.

To put this in Bible terms, the site in question is a little northwest of the town of Adam. Why is this significant? Because when Joshua and the children of Israel crossed the miraculously dried-up Jordan river to enter the Promised Land, the town Adam is named as the location where the Jordan River's "waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap" (Joshua 3:15,16). Because of this association with the town of Adam, some scholars think that this stone structure may actually be the Gilgal mentioned in Joshua - although it has to be said that this doesn't seem to square easily with its description in Joshua 4:19 as being "on the east border of Jericho". So, it's best to remain a little cautious. In any case, this gilgal, the ancient camp where the Bible says Joshua and the children of Israel first settled after entering the Promised Land, is associated with lots of interesting events – all of which we can read about in Joshua chapter 5 - and all marked with the theme of new beginnings – which connects with the Israelites at this time renewing their covenant with God as they finally entered the land that'd been promised to them.

And then later in history, we have Samuel renewing Saul's kingship at this same place, and later still the people reaffirming David there as their king. But we'll come to all these in turn, and review the lessons we can learn from them. But so far, we've only read about how Joshua obeyed God's command to take 12 stones from the Jordan riverbed and set them up at Gilgal as a memorial to the Jordan River crossing. In fact, it may well have been two monuments or two circles of stones – for pay careful attention to the following reading for yourself. It's from Joshua 4 (NKJV): "And the children of Israel ... took up 12 stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. Then Joshua set up 12 stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood ..."

It does seem as if there were two arrangements of stones - one set up on the riverbed while it was dry, and the other set up on the far side, in the promised land, made from stones taken from the riverbed. The stones on the riverbed would, of course, soon be hidden as the water of the river Jordan returned to its normal flow and covered over them. That would mean we have here hidden stones as well as public stones. Isn't that the way of it in much of our Christian experience - without the inner, hidden reality there'll be no evident and effective testimony in public? But in thinking of the possibility or even likelihood that there were stones put down - and so (later to be) under the water - and others lifted out from the water, our thoughts easily turn to our Christian baptism when we were put in water and then lifted out of the water to publicly show our identification with our Lord in his death and resurrection.

Coming back to the Jordan crossing, and the visible memorial of stones on the riverbank, let's refresh our memory: "... it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. When the circumcising of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho. And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of the land. And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year" (Joshua 5:7-12).

This Gilgal, at the time of entry into the land, was where God's people came to remember: they remembered God's covenant with Abraham (vv.7,8); they remembered how God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt (vv.9,10); and they'd also have cause to remember God's provision throughout all their desert journey to get to the Promised Land as here it was that it finally became no longer necessary (vv.11,12). In addition, they were now to keep the memory of this river-crossing – at the very place where they were setting foot on their land for the first time.

The name 'Gilgal' was given because God had "rolled away the reproach of Egypt" from the people. The Hebrew word gilgal means a wheel or circle, or something that rolls. Although, as we've said, there appear to be several Gilgals (gilgalim) mentioned in the biblical accounts, this particular Gilgal at Israel's first encampment in their Promised land represents the most significant of this type of structure from the time of Joshua until the time of King Saul. Later, it faded into obscurity in the eighth century BC and even, alas, became a symbol of apostasy in the writings of the prophets Amos and Hosea.

As fascinating as it is to speculate on these ancient circular and foot-shaped gilgals in the Holy Land, it's of more benefit to make a spiritual application from the associated events, relating Israel's experience in some way to our own journey. I suggest that from this gilgal we learn from God that he wants his people to remember their important spiritual milestones. In this way, we too will gain a strong foothold in our Christian experience. It makes for spiritual growth when we regularly take time to remember what God has done for us. Let's do that by concluding this chapter with a New Testament scripture reading - it's one which takes us from personal salvation experience through to the type of corporate service we are privileged to be part of if we follow the scriptural blueprint with care:

"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which **you formerly walked** according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them **we too all formerly lived** in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) ...

Therefore **remember that formerly** you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands ... **remember that you were at that time** separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you **who formerly were far off** have been brought near by the blood of Christ ... So then you are no longer strangers

and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:1-5, 11-13,19-22).

(Emphasis added to show how our memory is to be stimulated). Let's recall with gratitude our salvation which was all from God; and ask if we've progressed along the same lines to having a place in God's spiritual house.

CHAPTER FOUR: PUTTING OUR FOOT DOWN

As we've been learning in this series of studies, recent archeological discoveries in the land of Israel have turned up a number of large stone circular enclosures that seem to have had sacred uses. Often, it was two circles with the evidence showing that the two circles taken together looked very much like a sandal. The idea behind this was likely to symbolize the fulfilment of the promise that "every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours" (Deuteronomy 11:24).

Perhaps there's a connection between this and with what we're told in Joshua 6 of the capture of the city of Jericho. Jericho was the Bible city with its famous walls, of course. We read in the Bible that all the Israelite warriors were commanded to "march around the city seven times". I wonder if this kind of ceremonial marching around the city might have indicated in the culture of those times - and especially to the inhabitants of Jericho - that the Israelites were laying claim to their city. After the seventh day of marching around the city, the Israelites invaded and captured the city, albeit with God's supernatural intervention. Marching around the city, and setting up circles of stones in the shape of a giant sandal, may both have been ways of claiming the promise God had given them that wherever they put their feet would become theirs to possess.

The basic meaning of the word gilgal is the idea of rolling or wheel or circle. The name 'Gilgal' has traditionally been associated with these stone circles that exist in and around the Holy Land. It's clear that a number of momentous things happened at the first place

referred to in the Bible as Gilgal. But we've also discovered how, in ancient Israel, there were in actual fact many Gilgals, not just the first one near to Jericho. The first mentioned Gilgal, however, is very significant as the ancient camp site where God's 600-year-old promise to Abraham began its literal fulfilment as the children of Israel crossed the Jordan and placed their first official 'footprint' in the Promised Land (Genesis 12,13,15); and it's the place, as we've seen, where Joshua and the children of Israel first set up camp after crossing the Jordan; and where that generation of wilderness wanderers were circumcised; and where they celebrated Passover, eating their first unleavened bread in the Promised Land (Joshua 4,5).

But other instructive things happened to them at that same Gilgal. It was while the Israelites, under Joshua's leadership, were still based at Gilgal that the Gibeonites worked their deception. You'll recall that God's specific command was for no treaties to be made with Israel's new neighbours. This was for the reason that those people would be corrupting influences, and so had to be destroyed. Realizing their peril, the Gibeonites presented themselves before Joshua pretending to have come from a distant place: "They went to Joshua to the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us" (Joshua 9:6).

Joshua was gullible. Had he prayed and consulted with the Lord, this clever deception would have been exposed. But Joshua trusted his own judgement, and took things at face value. He ended up making a deal with the Gibeonites, contrary to God's intention. It was only afterwards that he discovered he'd been conned – that these people lived a lot nearer to them than they'd claimed. What happened next is instructive. Upon discovery of his mistake, Joshua did not declare the deal null and void, although it had been based on false premises. Although made in error, Joshua kept his word, for the leaders of the congregation had sworn an oath to these deceivers. It's even possible to see the hand of God in this, for these men were God-fearing, and they became servants to God's people to perform menial services in support of Israel's worship of the true God. Very soon, however, the pagan king of Jerusalem with four other kings threatened the Gibeonites

because they had entered into an agreement with the new invaders of the land of Canaan, the Israelites.

Outnumbered and overwhelmed now "... the men of Gibeon sent word to Joshua to the camp at Gilgal, saying, "Do not abandon your servants; come up to us quickly and save us and help us, for all the kings of the Amorites that live in the hill country have assembled against us." So Joshua went up from Gilgal, he and all the people of war with him and all the valiant warriors. So Joshua came upon [the five attacking kings] suddenly by marching all night from Gilgal. Then [after defeating the kings in an epic battle] Joshua and all Israel with him returned to the camp to Gilgal (Joshua 10:6-7, 9, 15). But the story continues, and is very interesting. It shows us that when the Israelites captured kings as well as cities, trampling them underfoot was something they did. The battle had been won, but the five enemy kings were still on the run.

"These five kings fled and hid themselves in the cave at Makkedah ... And Joshua said, "Roll large stones against the mouth of the cave and set men by it to guard them, but do not stay there yourselves. Pursue your enemies; attack their rear guard. Do not let them enter their cities, for the LORD your God has given them into your hand." When Joshua and the sons of Israel had finished striking them with a great blow until they were wiped out, and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the fortified cities, then all the people returned safe to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah ... Then Joshua said, "Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me from the cave." And they did so, and brought those five kings out to him from the cave, ... And when they brought those kings out to Joshua, Joshua summoned all the men of Israel and said to the chiefs of the men of war who had gone with him, "Come near; put your feet on the necks of these kings." Then they came near and put their feet on their necks. And Joshua said to them, "Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous. For thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight" (Joshua 10:16,18-25).

"Put your feet on their necks," Joshua had ordered his warriors. Remember again the promise that "every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours" (Deuteronomy 11:24). Can we say that this doesn't apply here? Relating this to ourselves,

one thing we're asked to do is to maintain unity and purity of doctrine. At Rome, in the church there, some people were causing divisions among the believers and this was by introducing various false teachings contrary to the standard and sound teaching of the New Testament as communicated by the Lord's Apostles. Paul diagnosed this as the work of our main enemy the Devil, and added in Romans 16:20: "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly."

After the similar wording we've met in Joshua chapter 10, we go on to read: "So Joshua and all Israel with him returned to the camp at Gilgal. And as we'll see in later chapters, it was also to this Gilgal that Joshua and the Israelite army returned after subduing the southern part of Canaan (Joshua 10:43). The prophet Samuel was another who visited this Gilgal during his annual judicial circuit (1 Samuel 7:16). It was there that Saul prematurely offered sacrifices and was installed; and later he was rejected as king in this same Gilgal (1 Samuel 11:15). Following that, the people of Judah met king David at Gilgal as they helped him cross the Jordan to return to Jerusalem and retake the throne from his late son, Absalom (2 Samuel 19).

Finally, it was from there that Elijah and Elisha walked before Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). We'll look more closely at all these in later chapters, but in concluding this one, let's just say that as fascinating as it is to speculate on these ancient circular and foot-shaped gilgals in the Holy Land, it's of more benefit to make a spiritual application from the associated events, relating Israel's experience in some way to our own journey. Israel were making this first gilgal their bridgehead, their first base of operations from which to conquer the enemy in the land they'd entered to possess. Thinking around that idea, what ground must we take in the Christian's spiritual warfare? The Apostles Paul and Peter spell it out for us: "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

And Peter adds: "... now you have RECEIVED MERCY ... as aliens and strangers ... abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent

...” (1 Peter 2:10-12). Christian discipleship is biblically described in terms of ‘warfare’ and ‘war,’ no less. What opinions and lusts do we need to trample underfoot?

CHAPTER FIVE: STEPPING OUT FULLY INTO GOD'S WILL

In each of these chapters, we're tracking the structures known as 'gilgalim' or the 'gilgals'. As the name itself in Hebrew suggests these structures are enclosures with circular features - circles of stones – more than one usually, and often giving the overall stone enclosure the shape of a giant foot. A handful of such sites have been found in the holy land - and would appear to date from the conquest of the land under Joshua. Previously, the inhabitants of that land were Canaanites. It appears that we can reasonably assume these well-documented modern-day archeological finds connect with at least two places both referred to as Gilgal in our Bibles. Since significant events in the history of God's dealings with his ancient people happened at these sites, we're motivated to revisit them for our spiritual benefit in this study, trying to discover how we can increase our 'Christian footprint,' as it were.

Having first featured the northern gilgal mentioned in Deuteronomy which must have been close to the site of Jacob's encounter with his brother Esau, we've moved now to the gilgal site nearer to Jericho which served as the first base of God's ancient people in the land that was formerly Canaan. It was here the people under Joshua's leadership rolled away the reproach of Egypt as they renewed the rite of circumcision associated with the covenant God had made with Abraham when affirming his promise of this very land to his descendants. It was here, you remember, that they'd set up twelve stones taken from the dried-up Jordan river-bed. There's every possibility they were set up as a circle of stones to serve as a memorial of how God's hand had been with them in the river crossing. So this particular Gilgal was where Israel came to first remember, and then renew their commitments to God.

I suggest we now stay with this same gilgal, for it seems to have been this site which features in the Bible's narrative throughout the days of Samuel, Saul, David and into the times of Elijah and Elisha. We meet it in the life of Samuel, at the point where we read: "Now Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He used to go annually on circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all these places. Then his return

was to Ramah, for his house was there, and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar to the LORD” (1 Samuel 7:15-17).

Samuel was a good judge, he worked faithfully and lifelong for God, but unfortunately his sons were not made of the same stuff as he was. The people saw this too, and they asked Samuel to appoint a king for them so they could be just like the other surrounding nations. This request displeased Samuel as he knew their motive was deeply flawed. God didn't want his people to be just like everyone else. After all, they were the people of the holy God of heaven! God softened Samuel's disappointment explaining to him that the people were not rejecting him, but rather it was God they were rejecting from being their supreme ruler. However, very graciously, God was going to grant their request. It was at this time in history that God directed Samuel to a young man called Saul. After making it clear to Samuel that Saul would be the first king, we read in 1 Samuel 10:1-2: “Then Samuel took the flask of oil, poured it on his head, kissed him and said, “Has not the LORD anointed you a ruler over His inheritance? When you go from me today, then you will find two men close to Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah; and they will say to you, ‘The donkeys which you went to look for have been found.’”

This was the first of three promises Samuel gave to Saul that morning. They took the form of three signs he was to look out for, and they'd all happen that same day. It was surely intended that this would give re-assurance to Saul just as he was about to enter into this new phase of his life. The responsibilities of becoming king would obviously be very intimidating for him. He'd need to be reassured this really was God's will and plan for him, and that as he stepped into this new and challenging role, he'd be able to trust in God for the things he'd need.

Maybe you're at the threshold of some new responsibility in Christian service – or are facing up to some change in circumstances that'll present fresh opportunities for witnessing. I think there's some way in which we can all benefit from the three special assurances which God gave to Saul that day through Samuel. But there was to be another, a second, sign: “Then you will go on further from there, and you will come as far as the oak of Tabor, and there three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you, one carrying three young goats, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying

a jug of wine; and they will greet you and give you two *loaves* of bread, which you will accept from their hand” (1 Samuel 10:3-4)

So, having dealt with the solution of problems, we now come to the second promise – the promise to supply provisions. At least I take it to mean, that God was intending Saul to understand that just as he provided welcome provisions that day, he could be counted on to do the same throughout his future service. Whenever we start out on a new venture for the Lord, one which we’re convinced the Lord is leading us into, we might still have very human anxieties about a variety of matters. Will we be able to find suitable accommodation? What about unforeseen expenses for which we’ve no savings in reserve? And many other things like that. The Apostle Paul had experience of this in his life of Christian service, and he could later share with the Christians at Philippi, the following reassurance: “my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

Finally, let’s take a look at the third promised sign. Here’s what we find as we read further in First Samuel chapter 10 about the third of those assurances:

“Afterward you will come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is; and it shall be as soon as you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and a lyre before them, and they will be prophesying. “Then the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man. It shall be when these signs come to you, do for yourself what the occasion requires, for God is with you. “And you shall go down before me to Gilgal; and behold, I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings. You shall wait seven days until I come to you and show you what you should do.”

Then it happened when he turned his back to leave Samuel, God changed his heart; and all those signs came about on that day. When they came to the hill there, behold, a group of prophets met him; and the Spirit of God came upon him mightily, so that he prophesied among them. It came about, when all who knew him previously saw that he prophesied now with the prophets, that the people said to one another, “What has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?” A man there said, “Now, who is their

father?” Therefore it became a proverb: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Samuel 10:5-12).

So, this third sign brings us to the promise of power being sent from God to enable Saul to serve the will of God. When we look over all three of these signs, here’s what we notice: they take us to a hill, a tree, and a tomb. And where else can we look, but to the hill of Calvary, and the tree of Golgotha, and the empty tomb of the now risen saviour. These are the sources of all our reassurances in service for him today – even the knowledge that problems will be solved, provisions will be supplied, and power will be sent.

Shortly after Saul’s return, Samuel introduced him as their new king. Some worthless men didn’t honour Saul with a gift, but rather sneered that he wouldn’t likely be able to deliver them. But it must have been so much more encouraging for Saul that valiant men whose hearts God had touched went with him. Isn’t that a great description? I hope we’ll be found in the ranks of those who become valiant for God because he’s touched our hearts. Saul was soon called into action. The Ammonite king thundered his threats against the city of Jabesh-gilead and they agreed an ultimatum. The Holy Spirit energized Saul in response, and he led Israel to victory against the enemy. This turn of events won over Saul’s doubters:

“Then the people said to Samuel, “Who is he that said, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Bring the men, that we may put them to death.” But Saul said, “Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has accomplished deliverance in Israel.” Then Samuel said to the people, “Come and let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there.” So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they also offered sacrifices of peace offerings before the LORD; and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly” (1 Samuel 11:12-15).

So they renewed the kingdom at Gilgal. How fitting that it should be at Gilgal. Gilgal, after all, was where the people of God came to renew their commitments – in this instance to Saul and to God’s purpose through him. So, what’s the message for us? In this installment of events based around one of the gilgals, we’re challenged to step out in full obedience

into all the will of God for our lives, claiming biblical assurances and overcoming our own doubts and perhaps those of others.

CHAPTER SIX: WHEN OUR FOOT SLIPS

Significant events in the history of God's dealings with his ancient people happened at sites associated with the name 'Gilgal.' We're revisiting them for our spiritual benefit in this book, trying to discover how we can increase our Christian footprint. We've moved on to the gilgal site nearer to Jericho which served as the first base of God's ancient people in the land that was formerly Canaan. It was here the people under Joshua's leadership rolled away the reproach of Egypt as they renewed the rite of circumcision which was associated with the covenant God had made with Abraham when affirming his promise of this very land to his descendants. It was here, you remember, that they'd set up twelve stones taken from the dried-up Jordan river-bed. There's every possibility they were set up as a circle of stones, and they served as a memorial of how God's hand had been with them in the river crossing. So this particular Gilgal was where Israel came to remember and to renew their commitments to God.

We now stay with this same gilgal, for it seems to have been the same site which features in the Bible's narrative throughout the days of Samuel, Saul, David and into the times of Elijah and Elisha. We meet it again, as we say, in the life of Samuel. We read: "And you shall go down before me to Gilgal; and behold, I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings. You shall wait seven days until I come to you and show you what you should do" (1 Samuel 10:8).

We'll aim to come back to those words – and their reference to Gilgal - but for now let's track the continuing storyline of the earliest days of Saul's reign. As I write this, the world is watching the early days in office of a new President of the United States – and in these modern times of the global reach of so-called Social Media, it seems as if every hour and every careless remark is seized upon and scrutinized. In Saul's case, when he'd been presented to the people as their first king, and the shouts of 'long live the king' had resounded and then faded away, there were still those who had their doubts about Saul. At this stage, these doubts wouldn't seem to be legitimate, for the doubters are described as 'worthless men.' They disrespected Saul, but wisely the new king didn't react to their provocation.

It would soon be a case of actions speaking louder than words. Before Saul was established in anything like a palace or royal residence, while he was continuing in fact to farm his family's farmland surrounding his hometown of Gibeah, a cry for help arose from another Israelite city which was under threat from the Ammonite enemy. Saul rose magnificently to the occasion with an appropriate sense of anger – we can say that because this was the result of God's Spirit coming upon Saul. This was no stirring of self-interest, but a reaction to injustice, and at what was an affront to God and his people. With God's help, he won a notable victory, and so silenced his doubters: "Then Samuel said to the people, "Come and let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there." So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they also offered sacrifices of peace offerings before the LORD; and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly" (1 Samuel 11:14-15).

So, Saul began to reign over Israel. Almost immediately Israel's arch-enemies, the Philistines, came against Saul and his men in a mighty show of strength. The Israelites became demoralised, and followed Saul trembling. In fact, let's read what it says in First Samuel, chapter 13: "All Israel heard the news that Saul had smitten the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines. The people were then summoned to Saul at Gilgal. Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead. But as for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him" (1 Samuel 13:4,7-8)

We've read those verses because of the frequent reminder that this drama was all taking place in the vicinity of Gilgal. Here was Saul in an early crisis. What to do? Samuel hadn't come - should he wait? But all the while he delayed, more and more of his army was deserting. Saul then made his fateful decision. He commanded the animal sacrifices to be brought, and in the absence of Samuel the priest, he – king Saul – took matters into his own hands, and performed the function reserved for priests: he offered the sacrifices. Clearly, this had been designed as a test, for we read in the text of v.10 that "as soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering ... Samuel came." It's hard to imagine what was

in Saul's mind as he greeted Samuel. Samuel cut straight to the chase, and demanded to know what Saul had done.

Was Saul kicking himself, I wonder, for acting prematurely, or might he have been satisfied that he'd made a rational decision in exceptional circumstances? At any rate, he was sounding defensive as he explained how he'd come to be caught red-handed. He explained that his thinking had been: "Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering" (1 Samuel 13:12). Samuel didn't accept that, and said bluntly: 'You have acted foolishly, you have not kept the commandment of the LORD ... your kingdom shall not endure" (1 Samuel 13:15). Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin.

Saul paid a heavy price. Perhaps we have some sympathy for Saul, for it seemed he'd been caught between a rock and a hard place. Do we sometimes cut corners, thinking to ourselves that the Lord will understand – that he'll lower his standards, sensing our state of awkwardness. At Gilgal, with Saul, we learn it never pays to be less than totally obedient to the Lord and his commands. Gilgal stands to remind us of the need to obey fully, faithful in all things, according to God's Word. We'll never advance God's kingdom in our lives, never live victoriously, if we fail to do all the Lord has commanded. How ironic that it should be at Gilgal that Saul's foot began to slip, and he lost ground, with victory turning to defeat.

Like Saul, we all make mistakes. The thing is: do we learn from them? Saul had another opportunity to demonstrate he'd learned his lesson. He was sent on a mission to completely destroy the Amalekites, a people who had a long history of hostility against God's people. Saul, with his army, was to be God's instrument of judgement. The commission Saul received was plain and simple: take no prisoners! Even the livestock was all to be destroyed. It started out well enough. Saul achieved the victory, but he took the enemy king prisoner and spared the best of the livestock. The Lord himself informed Samuel of this before he went to see it for himself. Samuel had tried to guide Saul in the right way at the beginning of his career. He must have had something invested in it, for it says he was distressed to hear of Saul's repeat failure to obey, and he cried out to the LORD all night. "Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel,

saying, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal" (1 Samuel 15:12).

Saul seems oblivious this time to anything questionable about his behaviour, else why would he be building monuments for himself. He seemed to be congratulating himself. Little did he appear to know what was coming. In fact, when Samuel arrived, he sounded pleased with himself as he declared to Samuel that he had carried out the Lord's command. Samuel's reply was classic: 'What then,' he demanded 'is this bleating of ... sheep?' Using a flawed defence as old as the human race, Saul diverted blame, saying "... the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal" (1 Samuel 15:21)

Notice also the gloss that he put on it. Saul had approved of a plan that presumed to improve upon God's original plan. Did they think they'd managed to come up with something God had not considered? Put like that, something that sounded spiritually-minded is now exposed as an outrageous audacity! Saul tried to defend the indefensible, but Samuel denounced Saul's action as no less than 'evil' in God's sight (v.19). He point-blank told Saul that God had rejected him from being king, based on the clear fact that Saul had once again rejected the word of the Lord. With the kingdom now torn away from Saul, Samuel turned to the royal prisoner, the enemy king who must have thought he had at least become a survivor. But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal" (1 Samuel 15:33).

Well, that's our final mention of Gilgal in this chapter. We're left with the clear lesson that if we're to take ground, and live victoriously then there simply cannot be any short-cut to full obedience. Let's learn the lesson Saul had the chance to learn and failed to do so. Let's be sure to check that we and our church association is one which complies fully with the biblical pattern for Christian service. We dare not think we can modernize and upgrade the purity and simplicity of the first century believers in churches of God. We must stand exactly where they stood – on the precepts of the Apostles' teaching, fully obeying all the commands of the Lord as we follow in the steps of Acts 2:41,42 - there's still no other way to take ground and make progress in the Faith.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REGAINING A FOOTHOLD

Recent archaeological discoveries in the Jordan Valley, and in the adjoining hills of Samaria, would appear to indicate that as Israel took possession of the land, they tended to mark their ownership by building several structures that actually resemble to this day a large footprint. These unusual structures, referred to as 'gilgals,' consist of two enclosed circles of stones that share a common border and, therefore, are joined together forming the shape of a giant footprint. One university professor from Haifa claims that the 'foot' structures found in the Jordan Valley may very well be the first sites the people of Israel built upon entering Canaan and testify to the biblical concept of staking ownership of the land with the foot.

As fascinating as it is to speculate on these ancient circular and foot-shaped gilgals in the Holy Land, it's of more benefit to make a spiritual application from the associated events, relating Israel's experience in some way to our own journey. We've already thought of some of them ... and now we come to the life of king David. In his life, too, Gilgal features. Once again there's a sense of renewal.

We should first review some of the background to David's loss of his throne. One desolate night in his life, David had come crashing down. Lust was his undoing, as it has been for so many others too. David broke his marriage vows. One moment's stolen pleasure would bring him years of heartache and brokenness further downstream in his life. It all seemed to come to a head when he later failed to deal decisively with incest and rape in his family circle. That left the door open for others to take matters into their own hands. Ultimately, one of his own sons would rise up against him and carry out a political and military coup, tipping his father off the throne at Jerusalem.

Before we return to the storyline of king David's experiences, it may be worth just noting that it was someone well-known to him, a son of his, from whom the threat to David's throne came. What's more, it was something he brought upon himself, according to the biblical principle that whatever we sow, we reap. David's personal moral collapse in sleeping with another man's wife, although graciously forgiven by God, would cast a long,

dark shadow over the rest of his life. He lost the moral authority he previously had, especially within his own family circle. He troubled his own family.

And sometimes in our lives for the Lord, it's a lapse of integrity in some area of our lives that slowly ripples through our lives disturbing them. We bring difficulties upon ourselves, and whereas before we may have been reigning in life through Jesus Christ, our king (Romans 5:17), we suddenly find other – perhaps familiar things – have usurped his place in our lives. It happens so easily. It happened to the church of God in Laodicea, according to Revelation chapter 3. They'd cooled off in their passion for the Lord. They soon discovered that the Lord doesn't stay where he's not given his rightful place. He was now on the outside of their lives, pictured in the memorable illustration of verse 20 as a street salesman knocking on the door to try to have them re-engage with him. We talk about 'cold-calling' and they certainly hadn't requested his visit to their door. The issue was would they bring back their Lord and king to regain the throne of their hearts?

That's a good point at which to return to our lessons from the life of David at Gilgal. He'd also had to retreat from his central and rightful place in the nation. Absalom, his son, had displaced him. It was the only time David lost his throne, and it was no foreign enemy army that had achieved this, but his own flesh and blood. Often it's our closest ties that can interrupt our walk with the Lord if we lose our discipline where they are concerned. We'll rejoin David now after the battle against Absalom's forces has been fought and won. In principle, David can now return and recover his throne, but what's the state of mind of the majority of the people. After all, many had sided with his son against him. David couldn't simply assume it would be business as usual, as it had been previously. The narrator of 2 Samuel captures the mood of the people: "All the people were quarreling throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies and saved us from the hand of the Philistines, but now he has fled out of the land from Absalom. However, Absalom, whom we anointed over us, has died in battle. Now then, why are you silent about bringing the king back?" (2 Samuel 19:9-10).

Notice how finely balanced it was. Some thought he'd blown it; others were for giving him a second chance. But I'd like you to pick up on that rallying cry by some back in that day.

They spoke about 'bringing back the king.' Those words, like any crafted political slogan today, have a certain ring about them. There will be times when the sense of them will have a voice for us in our lives, in application to the King of kings. No matter how often we sing the words of the song: 'King of my life I crown Thee now,' there will be times when things we allow to happen will deprive our King, Jesus, from his rightful place on the throne of our heart. Some time later, the Lord will appeal to us, as he did to the Laodiceans, and the issue will be: 'will we bring back our king?' Well, let's see what happened in Israel:

"Then King David sent to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, saying, "Speak to the elders of Judah, saying, 'Why are you the last to bring the king back to his house, since the word of all Israel has come to the king, even to his house? You are my brothers; you are my bone and my flesh. Why then should you be the last to bring back the king? Say to Amasa, 'Are you not my bone and my flesh? May God do so to me, and more also, if you will not be commander of the army before me continually in place of Joab.' Thus he turned the hearts of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king, saying, 'Return, you and all your servants.' The king then returned and came as far as the Jordan. And Judah came to Gilgal in order to go to meet the king, to bring the king across the Jordan" (2 Samuel 19:11-15).

It's interesting that David had to take the initiative, and notice that he sent his appeal to the elders, those who were more mature in experience and in positions of responsibility. Why were they the ones who were hesitant? But isn't it true that the passion of a much younger Christian can be a rebuke to our own spiritual stagnation? The heart is the most deceitful thing in the world (Jeremiah 17:9) and so it's no surprise when among the ranks of those who have once taken a spiritual lead in the lives of others, there can be found some who, at times, are found to be lagging behind. Why, indeed, are they the last to experience personal revival? Has life become settled, comfortable? Are they - and do we become - content, relying on some past success which the Lord has previously granted?

You probably picked up on the fact that it was to Gilgal that the people came once they'd decided to welcome back their king, and give him safe passage across the Jordan river. At Gilgal they recognized their debt to David, and renewed their commitment to him

personally. Things tended to come full circle at Gilgal. It does seem bound up in its significance with important renewals. Now, here again comes the reminder why we're considering this episode from David's life:

"Now the king went on to Gilgal, ... and all the people of Judah and also half the people of Israel accompanied the king. And behold, all the men of Israel came to the king and said to the king, 'Why had our brothers the men of Judah stolen you away, and brought the king and his household and all David's men with him over the Jordan?' Then all the men of Judah answered the men of Israel, 'Because the king is a close relative to us. Why then are you angry about this matter? Have we eaten at all at the king's expense, or has anything been taken for us?' But the men of Israel answered the men of Judah and said, 'We have ten parts in the king, therefore we also have more claim on David than you. Why then did you treat us with contempt? Was it not our advice first to bring back our king?' Yet the words of the men of Judah were harsher than the words of the men of Israel" (2 Samuel 19:40-43).

As we've said, the people of Judah met King David at Gilgal and helped him cross the Jordan to return to Jerusalem and retake the throne from his late son, Absalom. They had been slow to welcome him back. How ironic then that the factions of Israel and Judah (the southern part of the kingdom) now seem to be rivalling each other as to who was the most loyal and who had the strongest claim to David. But, in a true way, this mirrors the inconsistency of our hearts' affections, and the inconstancy of our spiritual desires. We, too, blow hot and cold, do we not? But a revival is no place for an argument.

During the days of the Welsh Revival in 1904, two men from London travelled to Wales. They said they wanted to witness the revival. When they arrived at the railway station, they asked the ticket agent where the revival was. The agent drew himself up to his full height, patted his chest, and said: "The Welsh revival, sir, is under these buttons!" (*Sunday School Times*). As that officer was plainly indicating, true personal revival occurs when the heart is stirred to bring back the king to his rightful place at the centre of our lives.

CHAPTER EIGHT: STEPPING INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

In this book we've defined the *gilgalim*, and found one in particular to be of special interest. We'll conclude our study with a further focus on what happened at this location. Our look at what happened here in the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha will complete our review of how we can realize God's plan for our life too. It's all about gaining a foothold from which to taste the powers of the age to come. We'll allow God's Word as we find it in the book of Second Kings to explain it further – from chapter 2:

“And it came about when the LORD was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind to heaven, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Stay here please, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.’ But Elisha said, ‘As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So they went down to Bethel. Then the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, ‘Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I know; be still.’ Elijah said to him, ‘Elisha, please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.’ But he said, ‘As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’

So they came to Jericho. The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, ‘Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?’ And he answered, ‘Yes, I know; be still.’ Then Elijah said to him, ‘Please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.’ And he said, ‘As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So the two of them went on. Now fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood opposite them at a distance, while the two of them stood by the Jordan” (2 Kings 2:1-7).

I'll just interrupt the story here to make the observation that this journey was one that started out from Gilgal. After the circuit we've traced with Elijah and Elisha, we're now back at the Jordan river. As we've seen, at each stage, Elisha's commitment was tested. Perhaps, we're reminded of the words of our Lord to his followers at the end of his Galilean ministry, when he challenged them by asking: “Would you also go away?” (John 6:67). May we be those who are like Peter then, and like Elisha here, in other words: disciples or followers who stay the course. There's a hymn we sing between each baptism

in the Philippines, and it says: 'The cross before me; the world behind me, no turning back, no turning back.' Hopefully, that's our motto too.

Well, what happened next with Elisha, you may be wondering? After all, the narrator has been building up the suspense: "Elijah took his mantle and folded it together and struck the waters, and they were divided here and there, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.' And Elisha said, 'Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.' He said, 'You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so'" (2 Kings 2:8-10).

I'm wondering as I read that, do I ask the Lord for hard things? Or are they easy things, for my comfort? There's a right sense in which we can be ambitious for the Lord. Elijah was noted for the power of his ministry in serving the Lord. The Bible pays tribute to "the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). A disciple may be as his master, but a double portion? A longing for God's Spirit to have more of us is surely something that the Lord is pleased to hear – in fact he guarantees to answer that prayer positively in Luke chapter 11:13. Notice I spoke there of the Spirit having more of us. I believe that's the way it works. How can we have more of God's Spirit? But he sure can have more of us – as we surrender every area of our lives to him.

Now, at this point, both men are on the far side of the Jordan – the same river the entire nation had crossed on dry land under Joshua's leadership when they gained their first foothold in the land God was giving to them. Our reading now continues: "As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw it and cried out, 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces" (2 Kings 2:11-12).

Chariots of fire! These words have been made famous in western culture, having been memorably assigned as the title of the film based on the life of a Christian athlete who refused to surrender his Christian principles. There's another reference to this incident in

the words that now often resonate from sports stadia across the world. I'm referring, of course, to the words: 'Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.' I doubt if many who sing them know much, if anything, about this likely origin for them. And there was hardly anything 'sweet' – in any sense – about this chariot and its fiery horses. It must have been a thoroughly awesome sight – and that's the point: Elisha saw it! Remember what his master, Elijah, had said in answer to him? Elisha had asked for a double portion of his master's spirit, and had been told if you see me ascending, then you know your desire has been granted.

So what was Elisha's response? He cries out: "My father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" Intriguing words, aren't they? What could he have meant by them? Was he commemorating the life of Elijah and the loss the nation had suffered here – it was as if it had lost its protective army (or should I say cavalry)? Apparently, it's recorded that Mary, Queen of Scots, once said that she feared the prayers of one man – those of the Scottish reformer, John Knox – more than all her enemies' armies. The powerful praying of Elijah is held up for us by the Apostle James in his New Testament letter (James 5:17). Elijah was a righteous man, and he's given as an example of the effective working of prayer when it's rooted in a righteous life. So, what's Elisha's next move "He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, 'Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?' And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over" (2 Kings 2:13).

This action has become iconic too. We speak of 'picking up mantles' – mantles that are falling as notable lives come to an end down here. And we mean precisely what's portrayed here in this original setting for that biblical expression. This is a story that's obviously shaped our language and our singing, but we need to drill down to get at what God wants us to take to heart from it. That's far more important than movies and catchy tunes. Here was Elisha experiencing personally the power of God in his life. He'd seen it second-hand in Elijah. But Elijah was now the past generation. The nation of Israel stood in need of a successor in the prophetic office. 'Where is the God of Elijah?' There were times when Israel's songwriters wistfully, it seems, recalled the past glory days of God's

powerful interventions on their behalf – the days of God’s right hand, as the psalm puts it – with the right hand being poetic, or symbolic, of strength. Do we read of what God has achieved in the lives of others who have gone before us, and wonder if we’ll personally ever experience a fraction of the same? Well, when Elisha prayed (in effect) ‘where is God?’ – the God who worked mightily through Elijah - God responded by displaying his power to Elisha and the onlookers: “Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho opposite him saw him, they said, ‘The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.’ And they came to meet him and bowed themselves to the ground before him” (2 Kings 2:15).

They say God buries his workers, but the work goes on. Except here there was no burial when God removed Elijah from this scene. Like Enoch, the other human who was taken without seeing death, Elijah was wonderfully taken up into heaven. Now, that raises all sorts of questions, doesn’t it? But we have to say that we don’t know the answers, so we’d best not speculate – the secret things belong to the Lord. It’ll be sufficient for us to grasp this brief sketch of the essential parts of this story we’ve reviewed. There was an ascending master (who was Elijah, of course). Then there was a waiting disciple (namely Elisha). And thirdly, there was a descending power (by which Elisha acted in parting the waters). Where else do we find that in Scripture? Why, of course, it takes us in thought to the second chapter of Acts, wouldn’t you agree? At least, in chapter one, the disciples had just witnessed their master ascending back to heaven. That same chapter finds them waiting prayerfully in Jerusalem. What they were waiting for, of course, was what we read about in chapter two which details for us the marvelous descending of the Holy Spirit to powerfully from that day on reside in the heart and life of each true believer on the Lord Jesus.

May God – yes, the God of the Apostles of our Lord – help us to live in the Spirit’s power for our time. God’s agenda may be different from that beginning in which people spoke in other known languages, but his ability is no less at all. Well, that brings us to the end of the road as far as these tracings out of the gilgalim are concerned. More a repeated feature than a single place, we’ve noted. Having revisited this feature, and recalled momentous events associated with such physical footprints, I trust we’ll gain ground, plant

our feet more firmly as we stand on his promises, and so increase our Christian footprint in this world for his glory.