

## Preface

Along with the apostle Paul, we are resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified, not as a narrow reduction of the Gospel but as a passionate embrace of the fullness of the Gospel. Jesus is not the blank screen upon which we project our impressions of him. How can we proclaim his name yet ignore his story? Instead of removing Jesus from the full thrust of Salvation History and formulating our own image of Christ according to our impressions, we should endeavor to understand Jesus in the light of the fullness of the biblical revelation. Salvation History continues to bear enormous impact on the life of the Church and ought to bear extraordinary impact in the lives of each and every believer.

Today's followers of Christ cannot afford to jettison the Old Testament. We were meant to begin at the beginning in order to fully appreciate the mystery of God and the mess of the human condition. The liturgy of grace and the litany of depravity compose a symphony of truth revealing the depth of divine mercy and human need. The Gospel's real world relevancy relies on dwelling on this history of revelation, for apart from the voice of God, human experience remains "formless, empty and dark." The person and work of Christ was and is revealed slowly through real relationships and specific acts. This history encompasses Abel's sacrifice and Cain's rejection, Noah's rescue and Babel's downfall, Abraham's blessing and Sodom's destruction. Salvation and judgment pulsate through history revealing the grace and mercy of God in the face of sin and evil.

But it is hard to make sense of this story without guidance. There is a difference between reading words on a page and hearing a true story that comes alive. Without insight and illumination the message can get lost in the details and side-tracked by marginal concerns. Salvation History may seem like a foreign country where the traditions and customs are not immediately accessible to visitors. And it is easy for today's "visitors" to become lost in the biblical text and feel frustrated. There's a great difference between landing in a foreign country where there is no one to greet you and arriving to a warm reception by a close friend who knows the culture intimately. When our family visited Ghana we would have been lost without the Mensah family. Instead of having to fend for ourselves and learn the culture by trial and error we were guided by people perfectly at home in the culture. They made the culture accessible to us. True evangelism reminds me of this warm reception by a close friend. The Gospel is foreign territory and the seeker needs a guide. The Household of Faith cannot make the Gospel so clear and simple that it is immediately accessible to all, but it can tell the Salvation History story in a helpful and compelling way. Sound bites and slogans will not do. That is not to suggest that a seeker needs a certain information quota to become a believer. My African brother, David Mensah was introduced to the Gospel by a Muslim who knew little more than the name, Jesus. But that name began to work within David a powerful transformation even before he began to understand the Gospel.

Everyone has a story, but only *Jesus'* story redeems our story. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men and women by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Only *his* story redeems our souls, inspires our worship, comforts our hearts, fills our

mind, and transforms our lives. It is this truest of true stories, the history of God's salvation, that we seek to know in a life-changing way through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit and our praying imagination. This goes well beyond deciphering the text and mining it for information. Our earnest desire is to be transformed by this true story. Our goal is to experience the Word of God the way the disciples did as they walked to Emmaus. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" We desire to learn from the risen Lord Jesus, who applied the whole counsel of God to himself. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

This is not an ancient myth or fictional tale we read to boost morale, but the very revelation of God that provides the eternal truth we need to live our lives. This story is by no means over. Salvation History is an on-going, dynamic story that changes the way we live today, even as it moves toward fulfillment and consummation. There is an immediacy about the story, a momentum about God's Salvation History that cannot be told without passion and decision every step of the way.

Early in the story we sense the depth of meaning that lies behind the cross of Christ. Abraham's Gethsemane-like experience on Mount Moriah and the redemptive symbolism of the Passover Lamb begin to prepare us for the Gospel of Grace. The line of redemption is established through Isaac and Jacob, but Ishmael and Esau are first in line to receive the blessing of salvation. Every nation has a story but only one story is for the nations. God chose to make of Abraham a nation that would bless the nations, so that "all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). All notions of moral superiority or religious elitism are dispelled as the Lord God set apart Israel for the holy purpose of revealing his redemption. Yahweh, providentially, if not painstakingly, made of Israel an object lesson of grace, a special parable of his saving provision, witnessing to the nations that salvation was by faith in God alone. Through the Exodus, God made his Presence known, "I am who I am" rules and reigns in spite of the Pharaohs of the world. Through "a series of set-apart places, set-apart objects and set-apart acts" God communicated the reality of his presence (Durham, p.501). Leviticus covers the story of how God taught the *children* of Israel the meaning of his holiness through a series of special offerings, priestly ordinations, dietary restrictions, physical conditions, holy days and ethical prescriptions. The sacrificial system was God's multimedia message on human sinfulness and divine forgiveness. Numbers is the account of how Israel set out on a journey of faith in the wilderness. In a word Exodus is about *deliverance*. The theme of Leviticus is *dedication*, and the focus of Numbers is on *direction*.

God graciously administered the people of Israel in every way, but they rejected his providential care and rebelled against his leadership. Nevertheless the message of Moses laid out in Deuteronomy sums up the set apart series by reiterating Israel's set above status, not for Israel's glory, but for God's glory. Israel was chosen for the sake of the unchosen, because God wants "all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). The book of Joshua brings this message home in a particularly powerful way by setting Joshua and Rahab side by side. Joshua occupied the most privileged position possible. He had been chosen, named,

tutored, and commissioned by Moses. But right alongside his story is the story of Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute, who became Israel's newest member by faith in the salvation of Yahweh.

In spite of God's blessing, Israel was bent on disobedience and apostasy. The downward spiral of evil intensifies as we move through Judges until Israel's rebellion against God becomes so perverse and pervasive that the distinctive character of the people appears lost forever. Canaanite culture has so permeated Israel's view of the world that even the judges, moved by the Spirit of the Lord, seem totally removed from Moses and Joshua. The cycle of rebellion, retribution, repentance and rescue intensified, revealing not only the full extent of evil, but the persistence of the grace of God. By the end of Judges, when Israel turned on itself and nearly wiped out the tribe of Benjamin, Israel seemed worse than the Canaanites. Salvation history appeared to be hanging by a thread. The book of Ruth however is a testimony to the prevailing grace of God. Naomi's sanctified lamentation causes us to think of God's lamentation for his people, even as it convinced Ruth, the Moabitess, to trust in Yahweh. The sovereign, saving work of God is evident everywhere in the story of Ruth and anticipates the story of David. Ruth is part of much larger story, with a beginning in Genesis and an end in Christ. Throughout the story we are continually reminded of the One who is greater than Abraham, Moses, Joshua or David. Salvation History is ultimately God's story of our salvation. It is the story of divine redemption in the midst of human depravity.

## **Chapter 13 Joshua 1-24**

### **The Promised Land**

*"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."* Joshua 1:6-9

Moving from Deuteronomy to Joshua, the story doesn't miss a beat. Joshua picks up where Moses left off in a leadership transition orchestrated by the Lord God. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Moses blessed Joshua's leadership in several significant ways. First, he appointed Joshua to assemble and command Israel's first army in the battle with the Amalekites at Rephidim (Ex 17:9). Then Moses chose Joshua to accompany him up Mount Sinai when the Lord God delivered the Ten Commandments and detailed how Israel was to be set apart. Joshua became Moses' trusted aide (Ex 24:13; Num 11:28) and experienced firsthand Moses' extraordinary encounters with God (Ex 33:11). Moses mentored the young Joshua in the dynamics of leadership. He helped his second-in-command discern the difference between danger and deception, as in the case of the golden calf celebration (Ex 32:17-18). And when Eldad and Medad prophesied in the Spirit, Moses gave Joshua a lesson in the difference between self-serving leadership and Spirit-filled leadership (Num 11:26-29).

## "Yahweh Saves"

Of the twelve spies sent into Canaan, Joshua could be said to be Moses' eyes and ears. His unique relationship with Moses was underscored by the fact that he was the only one of the twelve spies given a new name by Moses (Num 13:16). Just as God changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Jacob's name to Israel, Moses changed his name from Hoshea, which means "he saves," to Joshua, which means "Yahweh saves." Joshua's old name was unacceptable. At best it was ambiguous. Did salvation's credit belong to God or man? Moses changed his name so that when Israel thought of Joshua they thought of Yahweh's salvation. He was careful to remove even the taint of the heroic and turn Joshua's identity into a testimony for God. The name change was indicative of how Moses helped define and focus Joshua's leadership.

Moses reassured the people that there would never be the need to turn to sorcery or divination, because "the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers" (Deut 18:15). Undoubtedly, when Moses said this he thought of Joshua, his immediate successor, but the prophecy finds its ultimately fulfillment in another Joshua, better known by the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, namely, Jesus. Those who are in the Story connect Moses' prophecy to Jesus, the one greater than Moses. Philip made the connection with Nathaniel. Peter preached about it at Pentecost, as did Stephen at his trial. There is a glorious paradox implied in the name Joshua. Hoshea became Joshua in order to let everyone know that Yahweh was their salvation not the man, Joshua. But in Jesus, the meaning of the name, Yahweh saves, is fully fulfilled in the Hebrew name, Hoshea, which means "he saves." For in the man, Jesus, the Incarnate One, "Yahweh saves," and "he saves," have truly become interchangeable.

Joshua's response to the challenge of the promised land is a good indication that Moses nurtured, rather than tried to impose a God-centered character in Joshua. Of the twelve spies only Joshua and Caleb insisted on receiving God's promise. "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them" (Num 14:8-9). The hostility of the "whole assembly" toward Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb was so intense that the crowd was ready to stone them. We hardly need further proof that Joshua knew the importance of remaining true to the will of God even if it meant risking his life. He learned that to stand by Moses, his mentor and model of God-centered leadership, was not only an honor and a privilege, but at times, decidedly dangerous.

Moses appears to have done everything he could to prepare Joshua for leadership. He chose Joshua at a young age, entrusted him with significant responsibility, empowered him with authority, and instructed him daily. And even though Moses deeply desired to enter the promised land, he was ready to transfer his leadership responsibility to Joshua. Moses wanted to see the promised land, but he refused to cling to leadership. He passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua with a command, which he repeated for emphasis, "Do not be afraid of them; the Lord your God himself will fight for you" (Deut 3:22).

In this divinely orchestrated succession, Moses was careful to stress before the people and Joshua that their primary leader was the Lord God. “The Lord your God himself will cross over ahead of you...Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the Lord said” (Deut 31:3). What Moses had stressed personally and practically for years was now rehearsed formally and publicly. Moses “summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged’” (Deut 31:7-8). The leadership transition from Moses to Joshua was complete with these words, “Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the Spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him” (Deut 34:9). The physical act of Moses laying his hands on Joshua, and then blessing him and praying for him, symbolized Moses’ forty year commitment to guiding and defining Joshua’s servant leadership.

We understand the challenge of the first chapter of Joshua in the context of all the blessings Joshua received. But now instead of Moses encouraging and challenging Joshua, it is the Lord God himself who commanded Joshua’s attention. Leadership ultimately rests on a personal encounter with God. Moses did a great deal for Joshua but there comes a time when a person stands alone before God and faces the challenge of the Master, not a mentor. Joshua’s faithfulness and obedience was not for the sake of Moses, but for the sake of God. We note that the Lord’s exhortation to Joshua adds nothing to what Moses had already told him repeatedly. Moses, the servant of the Lord, had gotten everything right. But unless Joshua truly perceived that he was under the Lord’s command, his work would rest only on human wisdom and human support. Now in the absence of Moses, the Lord God reaffirms the promise of the land and reassures Joshua of his abiding presence.

The phrase, “Be strong and very courageous” is repeated three times as a challenge rather than a criticism. There is no indication that Joshua suffered from a failure of nerve, but it was essential for him to take charge confidently and command the loyalty of the people. Moreover, the sum and substance of Joshua’s leadership depended on the Word of God. The Lord reminded Joshua of what his priorities needed to be:

“Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (1:7-8).

Together these commands, “Be strong and very courageous” and “Be careful to obey all the law” encompass the heart and mind of God-centered servant-leadership. Courage without biblical convictions ends up as empty bravado, while convictions without biblical courage smacks of cowardliness. To have one attribute without the other undermines leadership and frustrates those who seek to follow. Like his predecessor, Joshua exhibited both biblical courage and biblical

conviction, a true sign of the presence and the power of the Spirit of God.

If the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh are any indication, the people of God responded well to Joshua's leadership. They pledged their loyalty to Moses' successor in absolute terms: "whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go...whoever rebels against your word...will be put to death" (1:16-18). All they asked was that Joshua fulfill two conditions. First, they insisted, "Only may the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses." And secondly, they demanded, "Only be strong and courageous!" Appropriately, their bottom line was God's bottom line. What God wanted in a leader is what the people wanted in a leader.

Joshua assumed his leadership responsibility having been blessed in every conceivable way. He reminds us of Jesus' well known line, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk 12:48). Or, as another translation says, "Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!" (The Message). Joshua is the recipient of the greatest benefits that could have been offered to an emerging leader: chosen, named, tutored, and commissioned by Moses, all in full accord with the blessing of the Lord God. But wait, this is not only a story about the likes of Moses and Joshua, it is also a story about people like Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute.

## **Rahab**

Before offering a tale of conquest, the book of Joshua tells a conversion story. The story is told in such a way that our attention shifts from Israel's leader to Israel's newest member. In preparation for crossing the Jordan and beginning the conquest, Joshua secretly sent out two spies to check out Jericho (Tell es-Sultan). Ancient Jericho was located West of the main ford on the lower Jordan River. It was a logical place for nomadic tribes to cross the Jordan and enter the land. The narrative offers few details, just enough to introduce Rahab. "So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there" (2:1). Whether the term for "prostitute" is the best translation is debated by some. It may refer to a woman living in a matriarchal society without male support, or to an innkeeper (Richard Hess, Joshua, p.83). It may be best to think of Rahab fulfilling all three possibilities. She probably ran a hostel that provided visitors whatever they wanted for a price. The text does not imply that the spies had sexual relations with Rahab. They apparently stayed at a place like Rahab's because it was as good a place as any to gather information and hope to remain unidentified.

It appears that the spies were unaware of the fear that Israel had stirred up among the people living West of the Jordan. From the king of Jericho to Rahab everyone was talking about Israel's exodus from Egypt and the destruction of the Amorite kings east of the Jordan. Over time, the reports and rumors had generated considerable fear. Evidently the people were on their guard. We don't know what gave away the identity of the spies, but Rahab, as well as others, easily picked them out as Israelite spies. Rahab concealed them on her roof and lied to the authorities when they came around looking for them. The apparent foolishness of the spies at being so easily

detected is contrasted with the cleverness of Rahab's lie. Her explanation sounded plausible, "Yes, they came to me, but how was I to know where they had come from? They left before dark and I have no idea which way they went." Her suggestion to the king's agents sounded supportive and reasonable, "Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." Her advice sent the search party racing out of Jericho.

However, the cleverness of her deception was only exceeded by the wisdom of her perception. She was really good at faking it to make it, but she was even better at telling it like it is. In a late night conversation she leveled with the spies, "I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you" (2:9). Yet there was more than fear driving Rahab's high risk strategy. Like everyone else in Jericho she was filled with fear, but she was also filled with faith. Sometimes fear and faith run together. A journey begun in fear may end in faith, that's how it was for Rahab. She explained the power of fear to the spies, "When we heard of it (the Red Sea crossing and the annihilation of two Amorite city-states), our hearts sank and everyone's courage failed because of you," but it was the power of faith that led her to conclude, "for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below" (2:11). Even before her encounter with the two spies, Rahab believed Jericho was going down to defeat because Israel's God was really God.

Rahab's faith was evident in two ways. Faith led her to confess, "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below," but faith also led her to seek salvation. "Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and you will save us from death" (2:12-13). It is a remarkable request. Rahab was willing to risk everything she had for a new way of life she could hardly have imagined, because she believed that what she had wouldn't last. Rather than turning in the spies and experiencing her fifteen minutes of fame, she threw herself on the mercy of God, hoping for a new life.

Rahab's confession and request is "one of the longest uninterrupted statements by a woman in a biblical narrative" (Hess, p.88). It is a wonderful testimony to the power of God's grace to penetrate and persuade even hardcore pagans of the mercy and love of God. The spies responded with an exclamation, "Our lives for your lives!" I don't think we can take this one liner as a simple quid pro quo agreement. The spies must have been amazed at Rahab's fear and faith. Their lives and Rahab's life, plus the lives of her family members, were now bound together in the plan of God. Their story had become her story. Remember, everyone has a story but only one story redeems our story. Miraculously, Rahab is now in the story!

Someone has defined the principle of the Cross as "my life for your life." Since Jesus laid down his life for our salvation, we should be willing to lay down our lives for the sake of others that they might come to know Christ. His unique, once-for-all atoning sacrifice is the reason for our sacrificial service. The apostle John sums up the principle of the Cross succinctly, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16). So what the spies said to Rahab, "Our lives for your lives!"

reminds us of the principle of the Cross.

But this is not the only reminder of the cross. The spies insisted on a distinguishing mark, a sign that would set apart Rahab's house from all the others. As any child knows from Bible stories in Sunday School, the spies chose the scarlet cord that Rahab had tied to her window to let them down. The scarlet cord may have already been there to advertize the purpose of her house, and thus would not have drawn undue attention. Rahab and the spies agreed that their arrangement would only be binding if the red rope hung from her window. Perhaps, a sign of Rahab's past life was transformed into a sign of salvation, but in any case the scarlet cord set apart Rahab's house as a household of faith.

### **Joshua and Rahab**

The contrast between Joshua and Rahab is both compelling and convicting, for we see the full range of God's grace at work. Together they represent "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18). The book of Joshua begins with two people who could not have been more different. Joshua was the recipient of God's special blessings. He was handpicked and personally trained by Moses. He was instructed in the Law of God and publicly ordained by God to lead Israel into the promised land. By contrast, Rahab was ignorant of the Law of God and raised in a culture immersed in idolatry and immorality. Joshua's name meant, "Yahweh saves;" Rahab's name meant "arrogance." For the Israelites the term "Rahab" was odious. It was synonymous with demonic power and was the symbolic name for Egypt (see Ps 89:10; Ps 87:4; Isa 30:7). But by the mercy of God, Rahab became a believer and one of God's own people. God's grace was extended not only to Israel's leader but to this Canaanite prostitute. Rahab faced her fears and trusted in the God of Israel, "for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (2:11).

In Rahab we have an early precursor to the Samaritan woman Jesus encountered at the well (John 4). Both women remind us that no person is beyond God's love. When we think of Rahab we don't think about the meaning of her name, but the courage of her faith. This is what the New Testament writers remember about her. For the author of Hebrews she is an example of faith (Heb 11:31) and James commends Rahab for risking her life and putting her faith to work (Jam 2:25).

In the book of Joshua the tale of conquest is put on hold long enough to tell us the story of Rahab's conversion. And the powerful example of Joshua is intentionally placed alongside the compelling example of Rahab. It is significant to note that Rahab's name is recorded in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). She was King David's great, great grandmother. Rahab gave birth to Boaz, who married Ruth, who gave birth to Obed, David's grandfather. Her line of descent is not that of an outsider and her heritage, like our own, is just the same as Joshua's.

### **The Conquest**

If you have ever been tempted to think that success depends upon brilliant moves and clever

strategies, and who hasn't, you will find the saga of Israel's conquest of the promised land revolutionary. In the history of war there has never been a story told like the story of Israel's conquest of the promised land. The story of how Joshua led Israel into the promised land focuses on the presence of God, not on their military strategy and tactics. After the initial victories of Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon, Joshua's military accomplishments are simply listed. The summary statement after the southern campaign is typical, "All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel" (10:42).

The meaning of this story is found neither in its politics nor tactics, but in its theology. Israel's campaign was initiated and empowered by God from start to finish. The chronicle is far more interested in God's actions than in human heroics. What Moses promised, Israel experienced, "The Lord your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of the land...Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut 31:3,6).

The battle of Jericho serves as a prime example of how the Lord sought to instill within his people a powerful sense of his presence. The story slows to a step-by-step description of how Israel was to advance. Each step was a reminder that God was with them. The first sign of God's presence was the ark of the covenant. "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, who are the Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before" (3:3). The people were warned to keep back a thousand yards, which was quite a distance when you consider the ark itself measured only three feet six and a half inches long and two feet, two and a quarter inches wide and high. The ark of the covenant, with its atonement cover and copy of the commandments, symbolized the presence of Yahweh. Its box shape inhibited idolatry and emphasized its symbolic significance. The ark was not a substitute for God, but a reminder of God. At a distance of ten football fields the priests carrying the ark must have appeared small on the horizon, but the truth they represented was great.

The second sign of the presence of God was the holding back of the waters of the Jordan, which was at flood stage, so that the entire Israelite camp could cross over on dry ground. The crossing took place on the tenth day of the first month, a date forever associated in the mind of the Israelites with the Exodus and the feast of Passover (Ex 12:2-3). As the Lord had been with Moses, when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, so he was with Joshua. The Israelites were commanded by the Lord to memorialize this event. A representative from each tribe picked up a stone from the middle of the Jordan and carried the rock over the Jordan. That night at Gilgal, on the eastern border of Jericho, Joshua set up the twelve stones and defined the meaning of the memorial. He said, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God" (4:21-24). As Joshua pointed out, the testimony of

the presence of God was not only for Israel, but for "all the peoples of the earth." A simple pile of twelve rocks intentionally marked the reality of God's presence.

We would expect that Israel was now ready to go against Jericho, but not yet. God took the unusual step of briefly incapacitating all the fighting men of Israel by re-instituting circumcision. This was the third sign of the presence of God. All the men who had come out of Egypt had been circumcised, "but all the men born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not" (5:5). After forty years they were reminded that God designed an intimate, physical reminder of the sign of the covenant. The people recalled the word of the Lord, "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Ex 17:13-14). God timed this ritual to maximize its personal significance for the whole nation. The ritual had been suspended in the wilderness because of the nation's disobedience, but by re-instituting circumcision God "rolled away the reproach of Egypt" (5:9). God intended this act of circumcision to signal an end to the negative spiritual influences of Egypt and the wilderness.

The fourth sign of the presence of God was the celebration of the Passover. This ritual of redemption, with its atoning sacrificial lamb, was a vivid reminder to Israel that their lives depended on the mercy of God. They were powerless to save themselves, but Yahweh was faithful in the past and he would be faithful in the future. What Moses had declared in the past, "Do not be afraid...The Lord will fight for you," was affirmed by Joshua for the future (Ex 14:13-14). A ritual that had reminded Israel of the exodus would now remind them of their entrance into the promised land. The very next day after Israel had celebrated the Passover, the manna ceased. God's miraculous provision of manna for forty years came to end as they entered God's promised land, a land "flowing with milk and honey" (5:6). Even their diet change was a reminder of the presence of God. There could be no doubt in their minds that God sustained them in every way, body, mind and soul.

Joshua's strange encounter with the Lord was the fifth sign of the presence of God. Near Jericho, Joshua was confronted by a man with a drawn sword. The scene recalls Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel (Gen 32:22-32) and Moses' experience of the burning bush (Ex 3:1-4:17). Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" Given the circumstances, Joshua's question, "Are you friend or foe?" was not unusual, but the answer certainly was. "Neither," the stranger replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." In effect he was saying, "I haven't come to take sides, but to take charge." It wasn't Joshua's place to take over or make the rules. God was in charge. This is an important truth for those who follow God to keep in mind. We don't give the orders, we take orders. We are under God's authority and we submit to the will of God.

Joshua's immediate response would seem to confirm that the "commander of the army of the Lord" was the Lord himself. Joshua "fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" Whatever mystery remains regarding the identity of the speaker was by design, but the command to Joshua, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy," implies that Joshua was in the presence of God. As

with the thousand yards between the people and the ark of the covenant when they crossed the Jordan, God's "distance" was intentional and served to underscore his immediacy and also his transcendence. Clearly the strategy that followed Joshua's encounter indicates the presence of Almighty God as well. The highly unusual strategy of marching around Jericho once a day for six days and on the seventh day circling the city seven times in a procession led by horn blowing priests and the ark of the covenant signaled to everyone that the victory was clearly the Lord's. When the people shouted and the walls of Jericho collapsed, Israel knew beyond a doubt that it was the Lord God who had defeated the inhabitants of Jericho.

The sixth sign of the presence of God was the extermination of the Canaanite population. This may be the most controversial and offensive fact in salvation history. It is best we face it squarely. What took place at Jericho was repeated throughout Israel's conquest of the promised land. The army charged into Jericho and "destroyed with the sword every living thing in it--men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys" (6:21). Everyone was put to the sword except Rahab and her family (6:22-23,25). When Joshua and all Israel conquered the southern cities they left no survivors. "He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded" (10:40; see 11:11). This was true in the north well. "For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses" (11:20). In fact when Israel was weaker, and felt more dependent on the Lord, they fulfilled God's will. But we read that "when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out completely" (17:13).

It is important to understand how the strategy of eliminating every Canaanite man, woman and child was a sign of the presence of God. Many have found it easier to conclude that Israel's holy war tactic of ethnic cleansing was yet another example of the atrocities of war done in the name of religion. But the opposite was true. This was a clear case of the holy God judging the inhabitants Canaan for the sake of the human race. On the surface the extermination of the Canaanites may appear to present an unsurmountable moral problem to anyone considering the truthfulness of the Bible and the legitimacy of Salvation History. But when the issue is considered in depth we encounter the reality of God's severe mercy. We discover the holy God whose justice is perfect and whose judgment is righteous.

Israel's mandate to drive out the nations was a unique command for a specific historical time and place. There is no philosophy for holy wars espoused in the Bible. God's purpose was to totally destroy the existing feudal states in Canaan and establish his chosen people in the promised land. Even as Moses declared God's will to drive out the nations, the follow-up prohibitions against making treaties and intermarriage implied that Israel would not be successful (Deut 7:1-6). Moses warned Israel not to conclude that the Lord God had chosen them because of their strength (Deut 7:7) or righteousness. "No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of the land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you..." (Deut 9:4-5).

God's universal judgment of evil awaits the end of time but that does not mean that all evil everywhere is allowed to go unchecked until the end. Both God's intervening judgment and ultimate judgment are merciful and just, worthy of all praise. Dramatic cases of judgment such as the flood (Gen 6) and Israel's conquest of the promised land remind us of God's great judgment yet to come (Rev 20:11-15). In the case of the Canaanites it was certainly within the will of the all-knowing, all-powerful holy God to eliminate a detestable, degenerate culture for the sake of humankind. Should the God of the Old Testament be judged as immoral for seeking to rid humanity of the grossest, most insidious forms of immorality known to man? The Canaanites were an idolatrous people, practicing ritual prostitution and child sacrifice in name of religion (Lev 18:24-29). Should the God of the Old Testament be judged as militant for fighting against Canaanite idolatry with its war-loving Baal and fertility cult?

If Israel had obeyed God's mandate they would have saved lives in the long run. Raymond Brown observes, "It can certainly be argued that if they had obeyed the admittedly severe command, it could have prevented more extensive loss of life for both Israelites and others at later stages in their history" (Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, p.51). Over time the problems stemming from Israel's disobedience were compounded and threatened the very identity of the people of God. If they had cut out the evil malignancy when they had the chance they would have strengthened future generations in the Faith.

Those who say they want nothing to do with the God of the Old Testament and his extreme measures should remember that what was at stake was not just God's blessing to Israel, but God's blessing to the nations. Remember God's covenant promise to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). God set apart Israel as his treasured possession, to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6) for the purpose of saving the world, not condemning the world. It is not God's fault but our's, if we fail to consider what lies behind the gospel truth we quote so easily, "For God so loved the world he gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in him should not die but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16).

The same God who commanded the total destruction of the Canaanites for the sake of moral necessity and the spiritual survival of Israel, has commanded all Christ's followers to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20). The invasion God calls for now is totally different from the one Joshua was called to carry out, but the two are very much part of the same story and both are true revelations of the grace and mercy of God. Today, Jesus commands, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44), but the day is coming when the King of kings and Lord of lords will release the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (Rev 19:15).

The seventh sign of the presence of God continues the theme of judgment. The spoils of the battle of Jericho, "all the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron," were set aside for the Lord and were designated for his treasury (6:19). A man by the name of Achan, from the

tribe of Judah, violated this sacred trust and took a beautiful robe from Babylon, five pounds of silver and a wedge of gold and hid them in the ground under his tent. It appears that Achan acted alone, but he put at risk the entire nation of Israel. God insisted upon the solidarity of the people of Israel. Because of Achan "the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things" (7:1).

Joshua should have inquired of the Lord before proceeding to attack Ai, but he didn't. Fresh from the victory of Jericho, Israel felt invincible. So when a contingent of three thousand men were routed and thirty-six men were killed by the men of Ai, "the hearts of the people melted and became like water" (7:5). Joshua was devastated. He tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord. He lost it. He was ready to turn back and cross the Jordan. "Ah, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!" (7:7). Joshua expected that the news of Israel's defeat was spreading like wild fire throughout Canaan. If his response is any indication we sense that Israel was on the verge of panic. Their confidence had collapsed like the walls of Jericho.

The tone of the Lord's response to Joshua was abrupt and stern, "Stand up! What are you doing on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies..." (7:10-12). God's insistence on emphasizing Israel's solidarity may be difficult for modern westerners to appreciate. From the Lord's perspective it was not a simple matter of individual culpability but a singular case of evil that destroyed the effectiveness of the people of Israel as a whole.

Even the process of presenting themselves tribe by tribe, then clan by clan, then family by family, right down to Achan himself, must have impressed all Israel with God's commitment to holiness. Just one person could bring destruction on the entire community of God's people. Achan's sinfulness cost the lives of thirty-six men and increased the possibility of greater casualties when Israel went to battle. As God commanded the total destruction of the Canaanites he condemned everything connected with Achan. Joshua, "together with all Israel," gathered up everything of Achan's including his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all he had, and took it to a valley to be stoned and burned (7:25-26). This dramatic testimony to God's insistence on holiness and integrity was a sign of the presence of God and cannot be relegated to the Old Testament. Years later the early church experienced a similar episode when Ananias and Sapphira were struck down for conspiring to lie about the size of their gift to the church (Acts 5:1-11). Luke reports that "great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:11). The true story of God's salvation history reveals a passion for righteousness that deserves our faithful attention. Only after Achan's sin had been dealt with was Joshua called to resume the conquest with the now familiar challenge, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (8:1).

The message of the book of Joshua is that Israel's success depended exclusively on the presence

of God. Apart from God they could do nothing, but with God they could conquer the Canaanites and occupy the promised land. All the signs and wonders described in the story of Israel's conquest remind the people of God today that we cannot fulfill God's will apart from God's strength. What was true then is still true today. If Jesus could say, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (Jn 5:30), how much more do we need to acknowledge our dependency upon the Lord God. Wherever we turn in the Gospel story we are reminded that victory depends upon the zeal of the Lord Almighty (Is 9:7). When David faced Goliath he summed up an invaluable truth, "...it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's..." (1 Sam 17:47). And the prophet Zechariah echoed this same truth when he declared, "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty" (Zech 4:6).

Depending on the presence of God was not a recipe for passivity. Joshua and the Israelites were personally engaged in the fight for the promised land, but more as worshipers than warriors. Their military strategies, while important, did not carry the day for them. They understood that engaging the enemy was more a matter of faith in God than heroic acts of bravery and military tactics. Faith was not a substitute for action, but its necessary foundation. From the crossing of the Jordan to the stoning of Achan, the Israelites participated in a struggle with implications far beyond Canaan. Trusting in God was not rhetoric, but reality for the Israelites and this should be true for Christ's followers today. We agree with the apostle Paul when he said, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Cor 4:20). Our confidence lies not in worldly wisdom and a pragmatic philosophy that claims the end justifies the means. On the contrary, from growing strong families in Christ to church growth and from global missions to "salt and light" ministries our confidence is in Christ. We say with the apostle, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13).

Some may dismiss Israel's conquest of Canaan as an old, old story with little or no relevance for today's Christian, but I believe Israel's entrance into the promised land serves as a graphic reminder of how to confront evil and accomplish Christ's great commission. Israel's experience of the presence of God parallels our own. They marched in a procession behind the ark of the covenant, we are called to abide in Christ (Jn 15). They were circumcised, we are baptized. They celebrated the Passover, remembering their exodus from bondage, we celebrate Holy Communion, remembering the finished work of Christ our Passover lamb. They fought evil as instruments of judgment, we fight evil as instruments of peace. They occupied the land, we seek Christ's kingdom (Mt 6:33). They struggled against deeply entrenched evil cultures, we struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). As the Lord God fought for them, he fights for us. "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Eph 6:13). The way the Israelites were encouraged to stay in the story is the way we are challenged to stay in the story. We tighten the belt of truth and suit up with the armor of righteousness. We move out with the gospel of peace and defend ourselves with faith in Christ. We protect ourselves with God's great salvation and put aside the weapons of the world in favor of the power of the Word of God.

## The Gibeonites

The theme of conquest continues in the book of Joshua, but the emphasis of the story is on decision making and the will of God. Israel's commitment to the Word of God is renewed on Mount Ebal. It was there that Joshua did what Moses had commanded Israel to do after they crossed the Jordan (Deut 27:1-28:19). He built "an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used" (8:31; see Ex 20:24-26). On the altar they sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, symbolizing their need for redemption and the blessing of God's mercy. Then Joshua inscribed the commandments in plaster on the stones (Deut 27:4) and recited before "all Israel, aliens and citizens alike" (8:33), "all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law" (8:34). It was a dramatic moment for the Israelites. "Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal" (8:33). Those near Ebal recited the curses of the law and those near Gerizim recited the blessings of the law. Everything in this episode was meant to affirm the whole counsel of God, the redemptive sacrifices on an idol-resistant altar, the inscription of the law, the reading of the law, the antiphonal reciting of the blessings and curses, and the attendance of every citizen and alien, every man, woman and child. It was a defining moment for the people of God and a powerful reminder that faithfulness to the Word of God was the key to success.

However, the Israelites learned the hard way that there is a difference between possessing the Word of God and following the Will of God. Israel's victories against Jericho and Ai galvanized the opposition. All the kings west of the Jordan "came together to make war against Joshua and Israel" (9:2). Their resistance did not surprise the God of Israel, "for it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses (11:20). The only exception to this were the Gibeonites, who conspired to cleverly deceive Israel into thinking that they had come from a great distance "because of the fame of the Lord your God" (9:9). Their description of what the Lord had done for Israel was impressive and their old clothes, broken sandals, worn-out sacks and old wineskins proved convincing. With carefully crafted flattery and a convincing full-costumed performance, the Gibeonites duped Israel into signing a peace treaty. Three days later Israel discovered that Gibeon was not far away, but right next door. Understandably, the people were angry with their leaders, and the leaders were caught between a rock and a hard place. They responded to the people's grumbling, "We have given them our oath by the Lord, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now" (9:19).

Two important qualities were evident among God's people. They were people of *the* Word and people of *their* word. But they lacked a third essential quality, highlighted in this significant line: "The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord" (9:14). Instead of praying about their decision they naively pursued their enemy's logic. It was not enough to affirm the written Word of God, as important as that was, nor was it enough, to stand by one's oath given in the name of God. It was absolutely crucial that the people of God pursue through prayer and worship the immediate will of God for a particular situation. By failing to inquire of God they failed to apply the written Word of God and in the name of God they swore an oath that they never should have made. The Gibeonite incident is a great reminder to us that we can

possess the Word of God without practicing the Word of God. Obedience requires not only explicit commands and genuine commitments, but prayer for wisdom to know how to apply the will of God in the daily dynamic of life. Three Greek words, *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, help summarize what is important for decision making and the will of God. Faithfulness requires following the Scripture principle (*logos*) with personal integrity (*ethos*) and devotional intensity (*pathos*). All three qualities work together and reinforce the believer's commitment to the whole counsel of God.

In spite of Israel's failure to inquire of the Lord, God's grace prevailed. The Gibeonites remind us of Rahab and her appeal for mercy. They used their fear of what the Lord God had already done to the Amorites, not to harden their hearts to fight against Israel, but to throw themselves on the mercy of Israel. Although they were known throughout the land as good fighters (10:2), they humbled themselves. Their *modus operandi* was deception, but their goal was mercy. "So we feared for our lives because of you, and that is why we did this," they explained. "We are now in your hands. Do to us whatever seems good and right to you" (9:25). The Gibeonites were not the first people to enter the biblical community through the back door and they won't be the last. Consider all the worldly motives that prompt people to start attending church, everything from making business contacts to assuaging guilt. But then to their amazement they become aware of the grace of God and overwhelmed by the good news of Jesus Christ. What began as deception is transformed by Christ into devotion. The Gibeonites gave up their status as good fighters to become "woodcutters and water carriers for the community and for the altar of the Lord" (9:27). They were not unlike those who give up their worldly status to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Israel's alliance with Gibeon drew them into battle with the five kings of the Amorites. This time, Joshua did not take action until the Lord confirmed his will. "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you" (10:8). Israel's victory was as miraculous as it was at Jericho. After an all-night march, Israel surprised the enemy, but killer hailstones and extended daylight assured Israel's victory. Joshua is credited with praying for God's help to overcome the enemy. Joshua "said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: 'O sun stand still over Gibeon, O moon over the Valley of Aijalon'" (10:12). It is difficult to say exactly what Joshua meant by this prayer, but clearly the Lord gave the victory. The author of the account is convinced of the uniqueness of these events. "There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a man. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!" (10:14).

## **The Land**

Israel's victories were so completely from the Lord that the land they conquered was received as a gift, rather than taken through acts of bravery. The land was not a symbol of their military achievements, but an inheritance from the Lord. They knew they did not earn the land, nor did they deserve the land, but they received the land by God's grace and favor (see 24:13). Because the Lord fought for Israel, it could be said of Joshua that he "left nothing undone of all that the Lord commanded Moses" (11:15). The first phase of the conquest was a success (Deut 7:22) and

it was time to list the defeated kings and divide the land as an inheritance “among the nine tribes and half tribe of Manasseh. The other half tribe of Manasseh, the Reubenites and the Gadites had received the inheritance that Moses had given them east of the Jordan, as he, the servant of the Lord, had assigned it to them” (13:7-8).

The land served as a concrete reminder to Israel of their relationship with Yahweh. The Lord God was the ultimate owner of the land and Israel held the land in trust (Lev 25:23). The old Canaanite culture was based on domination and power politics, but Israel’s culture was to be based on shared ownership, mutual support and faithful obedience to the law of God. Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright explains, “In contrast to pre-Israelite Canaanite society which was organized along ‘feudal’ lines, with power residing at the elite top of a highly stratified social pyramid, Israel was a ‘tribal’ society. It had a kinship structure based on a large number of ‘extended-family’, land-owning households....Israelite society was more broadly ‘egalitarian’ rather than ‘hierarchical’” (Christopher Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*, p.37). Instead of the feudal king owning all the land under the old regime, the people of Israel received the land from God as a gift, inherited family by family, from one generation to the next and used according to the will of God.

Rooted in history and geography, the land was Israel’s tangible proof of their relationship with the Lord. It was the physical manifestation of God’s spiritual and redemptive blessing. However, Israel’s theology of the land was only a provisional blessing and was designed to be transcended by the church, the Body of Christ. In much the same way as the sacrificial system was a temporary provision pointing to the Cross of Christ, the blessing of the land was a significant pointer to God’s blessing of the universal church. The inheritance of the people of God is no longer tied to a relatively small geographic designation, but to the everlasting destiny of the Kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus shifted the promise of God from the land to the experience and destiny of the biblical community. “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:29). When the apostle Paul prayed that believers might know “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,” he was not referring to land but to life—eternal life (Eph 1:18). All of the various dimensions of Israel’s inheritance, including the promise of the land, its conquest and division, as well as its stewardship and ethics, find a parallel in today’s biblical community. The blessing of the land for the house of Israel prepares us for the blessing of the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ.

The Promised land became the proving ground for Israel’s faith and trust in Yahweh. Some were up for the challenge and others were not. Caleb, who had followed the Lord wholeheartedly for forty years (14:8), was definitely ready. He was eighty-five years old, but his commitment to God’s will was as fresh as ever. He recounted to Joshua the promise Moses had made to him, “The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly” (14:9). In spite of the enemy’s fortified cities, Caleb was eager to claim his inheritance, “Now give me this hill country

that the Lord promised me that day..." His confidence was a testimony to his God, "The Lord helping me, I will drive them out..." (14:12).

A special note is included in Caleb's victorious conquest of Hebron offering a glimpse into a father's sensitivity to his daughter and her inheritance. God was doing a new thing in the land, something unheard of under the old order. Acsah, Caleb's daughter, approached her father with a request, "Do me a special favor. Since you have given me land in the Negev, give me also springs of water." Caleb responded by giving Acsah the upper and lower springs (15:19). Along a similar line, the five daughters of Zelophehad, from the tribe of Manasseh, appealed to Joshua and the leaders of Israel for their inheritance. They rested their case on the will of God. "The Lord commanded Moses to give us an inheritance among our brothers" (17:4). In keeping with "the Lord's command," Joshua gave them an inheritance, underscoring the fact that families, including daughters, were entitled to hold land. God was shaping a new society in the promised land based on family relationships rather than feudal domination. God's will radically changed daily life and gave *all* Israel hope of God's blessing.

The problems that will take center stage in the book of Judges are only briefly referenced in Joshua. Not every tribe was up to the challenge. Judah was unable to dislodge the Jebusites (15:63) and the tribe of Joseph complained that their allotment was too small. Although Joshua offered them the forested hill country as well, they complained that the Canaanites were powerful and had iron chariots (17:14-18). Although the seeds of discontent and disobedience were evident, the Joshua era was wonderfully blessed by God. The land was divided according to God's will. Each tribe received their allotment, the cities of refuge were established and the Levites were allotted their towns. The theme of the book of Joshua is summarized well in these words,

"So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (21:43-45).

Clearly the Lord had blessed Israel greatly and fulfilled his promises to them. Whatever failure or faithlessness was to come in the future, Israel could not fault the faithfulness of God. If they fell away they only had themselves to blame.

### **Stone Memorials**

Beginning with the twelve stones memorializing the crossing of the Jordan, Israel marked the blessing of God with an unadorned pile of rocks. They built an altar of uncut stones on Mount Ebal and heaped up a large pile of rocks marking the ordeal of Achan. They celebrated their victory over Ai by raising a large pile of rocks over the body of the slain king. They placed large rocks by the entrance to the cave where the five Amorite kings were executed. Wherever they went they left stone memorials testifying to the presence and power of God. These iconoclastic

symbols were unlike the idols and shrines featured in Canaanite religion which were designed to appease the gods and enhance fertility. In sharp contrast, Israel deliberately set up memorials to specific acts of God in history. A simple pile of rocks, unadorned by human hands and unadulterated by human ideology, marked a particular point in God's salvation history story. An earthy memorial served as a reminder of the Lord of History, rather than a pagan shrine.

With the first phase of the conquest over, Joshua was ready to send the eastern tribes, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh, home to the east side of the Jordan. He solemnly instructed them. "Be careful to *keep* the commandments and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to *love* the Lord your God, to *walk* in all his ways, to *obey* his commands, to *hold fast* to him and to *serve* him with all your heart and all your soul" (22:5). But the eastern tribes had hardly been gone when Israel heard a very disturbing report. Near the Jordan the eastern tribes decided to build "an imposing altar," one that was visible for miles. This was immediately perceived by the rest of the Israelites as a threat to true worship. The intensity of their reaction was a testimony to their passion for God. They were ready to go to war and "devastate" them (22:33), because they perceived that the eastern tribes were setting up an alternative religion. They knew that nothing would destroy the solidarity of the people of God faster than individual tribes deciding to worship God in their own way. Such autonomy violated the unity and the mutuality established by God for the biblical community and helps explain why the Israelites reacted the way they did. What follows is an important case study in Spirit-led conflict resolution.

Before attacking, a delegation representing each of the tribes on the west side of the Jordan, was dispatched to Gilead to confront Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. The leader of the delegation, Phinehas, son of Eleazar the priest, presented their concerns passionately. "The whole assembly of the Lord says, 'How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now?'" (22:16). He recounted past acts of rebellion, such as the time Israel bowed before the Baal idol at Peor (Num 25:1-13) and the sin of Achan (Josh 7). Phinehas made a strong case, "If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel. If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord's land, where the Lord's tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God" (22:18-19).

If the eastern tribes had reacted defensively and condemned the delegation for false accusations, and blamed them for a failure to trust them, especially after they had risked their lives fighting alongside them, the outcome could have easily gone from bad to worse. Thankfully, they didn't react negatively, but humbly responded with a like-minded God-centered passion. "The Mighty One, God the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, do not spare us this day. If we have built our own altar to turn away from the Lord and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the Lord himself call us to account." They began at a point of theological and emotional agreement. If their motive had been to set up an alternative worship site it deserved to be condemned. But such apostasy had never entered their mind. They had no

interest in competing with the tabernacle. On the contrary the altar was meant to be a witness, a memorial to their shared faith in Yahweh and their commitment to a single site for Israel's corporate worship.

The conflict evidenced mistrust on both sides. Those on the west side of Jordan feared the easterners would go their own way and those on the east side felt that in time they would be unwelcome and told they had no share in the Lord (22:25). Fear on both sides resulted from under-estimating each other's passion for God. Ironically, the conflict actually proved that all Israel wanted to stay together under Yahweh. In spite of the emotional zeal that Phinehas undoubtedly felt, he was able to truly listen to the easterners and understand their motives. He acknowledged that what they did was good and he credited their response with saving Israel from a disaster. His announcement brought resolution to a very tense situation. "Today we know that the Lord is with us, because you have not acted unfaithfully toward the Lord in this matter. Now you have rescued the Israelites from the Lord's hand" (22:31). It was fitting that the Reubenites and the Gadites named the altar, "A witness between us that the Lord is God" (22:34). Once again a stone memorial marked the presence of God among his people.

The final days of Joshua's leadership were just as Spirit-led as they were at the beginning when Moses laid his hands on him (Deut 34:9). In his farewell to Israel's leaders, Joshua intentionally rehearsed the major themes of his servant-leadership. He gave credit where credit was due, "it was the Lord your God who fought for you" (23:3). He repeated the challenge, "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses." He encouraged them, "So be very careful to love the Lord your God" (23:11). And he warned them, "If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you" (23:16).

Following his conference with the leaders, Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem and beginning with Abraham he told them the story, God's salvation history story. He believed that it was essential to know the story in order to stay in the story. We sense Joshua's deep emotion as he confronted the people that day, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (24:15). The people responded emphatically, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!" But Joshua was not impressed. "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins." Joshua's words remind us of Jesus and his consistent mistrust of the crowds who were ready to rally around him, but unwilling to follow him. Such words expose would-be disciples who appear eager but refuse to count the cost of following Jesus (Lk 9:57-62). Like Joshua, Jesus did not entrust himself to the crowd, "for he knew all people" (Jn 2:24).

It was almost as if Joshua could see the disobedience and apostasy coming. "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord" (24:22). And even though he commanded, "Throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel," there was no evidence of them taking concrete action (24:23). One gets

the impression that Joshua thought talk was cheap. Nevertheless he made a covenant for the people and “recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord” (24:26). Once again we have a stone memorial. “See!” Joshua declared, “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God” (24:27).

With the pile of twelve stones on the other side of the Jordan, God started a method of witness that Joshua picked up on and used to mark the real power and presence of God among the people. These stone memorials remind us of Jesus Christ, who is identified as the rock in the New Testament. Following the apostle Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus declared, “upon this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18; see 1 Cor 10:4). The message of the metaphor is that the real power and presence of God are to be found in Christ, salvation’s sure foundation. Peter understood this when he wrote, “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by people but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Joshua knew in his heart that the large stone he set up under the oak near the holy place of the Lord would end up witnessing against the people of commitments made to God and broken. But their disobedience pales in significance when compared to those who reject Jesus, who is described by both prophet and apostle as “a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (1 Peter 2:8, see Isa 8:14).