

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 14. The Land God cared for.

Canaan was ripe for invasion. For centuries the land had been controlled by a handful of powerful city-states governed by petty monarchs owing allegiance to Egypt, and warfare among them was common, resulting in chaos in many parts of the country. Bands of discontented peoples roamed the hills, raiding towns and villages. There was a small, land-owning military upper class and a landless lower class, many of them longing for release from centuries of oppression. The Canaanite civilization was so thoroughly degenerate that it was beyond repentance. Their idol worship included sexual perversion and the sacrificial slaughter of infants. Every level of their society was contaminated by evil.

Joshua's God-given mission was to eliminate the evil and unrest so that Israel could maintain the land as the sovereign God meant it to be, a prosperous and delightful home for the nation to witness to God's grace and love to His children. But while no Canaanite nation chose to accept God's offer of grace and pardon, there were individuals like Rahab who decided to worship Israel's God and who gained acceptance into Israel's community. In Joshua 8:30-35 Joshua renews the Covenant and reads out the Book of the Law to all the people, including the women and children, *and the aliens who lived among them.*

This Promised Land, however, was not without its challenges for Israel. Here the agricultural conditions were vastly different. Instead of the annual flooding of the Nile in Egypt, they would now have to contend with a scarce and unreliable rainfall. Fierce warriors and pagan worshippers all around them were a constant threat to life as Israel was commanded to live it. Yet even here we see the grace of God. Deuteronomy 11:10-12 reads, "The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt ... where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot The land you will possess is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. *It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.*" Israel in Egypt had to work hard on the foot treadles to pump water into their gardens but in their Promised Land they only had to accept the rain that came freely from heaven. It was a symbol of their liberation.

It was part of Joshua's brilliant strategy to begin his conquest with Jericho, giving Israel control of its strategic plains, fords and roads as a base of operations, and driving a wedge into the centre of the land of Canaan, making it easier later to conquer the southern and then the northern kingdoms. But even the victory over Jericho was marred by sin, as chapter 7 tells. Against the Lord's decree that the considerable wealth of the city should be devoted to Him as a kind of "first fruits" of Canaan, one man could not resist his envy at a "beautiful robe from Babylonia" and a pile of silver and gold, and covertly buried them in the ground where his tent was pitched.

Joshua had decided that the lesser town of Ai would be the next for demolition, and the spies he sent to reconnoitre were confident that 2- or 3,000 soldiers could do the job. Alas! Verses 4 and 5 tell us the men were routed by the men of Ai, and 36 of them were killed. At this defeat "the hearts of the people melted and became like water."

In great distress Joshua prostrated himself before the Ark of the Lord and was soon joined by the elders who went into official mourning. "Why? Why has this happened, Lord?" Joshua pleaded. "If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! ...The Canaanites will hear about thisand wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?" God's uncompromising answer was that someone had taken for themselves what should have been devoted to God and His help would be withdrawn until he was punished.

Joshua gathered the people together and by a process of elimination, Achan's sin was uncovered. His punishment was to be stoned, along with his family which he had involved in his sin. Such severe punishment was necessary to establish a precedent for the whole nation, ever too prone to stray from the path of God's direction. After this cleansing the army again attacked Ai, in chapter 8, with Joshua cleverly using an ambush and a fake retreat to draw the fighting men out of the town so that it could be sacked. This time God allowed them victory and the provision that "you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves." Sobered by this experience, Joshua called the nation together to renew allegiance to the Covenant and to remind them through the public reading of the Law that the blessings of God would come only through obedience to Him. In verse 33 the nation now included aliens -those who had either come out of Egypt with them or joined them in their desert wanderings, and maybe local people who had joined them. These were all given the law to guide them in worship to God.

Ironic, isn't it? If Achan had only waited, he could have had his legitimate share of the booty – maybe even a more beautiful robe from Babylonia! How much we lose when we impatiently grab what is not ours instead of waiting for God's perfect timing!

In chapter 9 we see that this latest success roused several of the remaining kings to rally against Israel. However there was one nation cunning enough to use trickery to succeed where war would not. The nation of Gibeon, situated not far from Jericho and one of the dominant powers of the central region, sent a delegation to Joshua kitted out to look as if they had travelled a long and perilous way, as in verse 6, "We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us." To Joshua, aware that God's command was to destroy only the people of Canaan, the plan seemed okay and, subduing his suspicions, signed a treaty of peace with them. It was a weak spot in his otherwise stellar career. In his haste he had neglected to seek counsel from God; it took only 3 days for him to discover their deception.

Of course the whole assembly "grumbled against the leaders" for such foolishness, but they accepted that the oath sworn on behalf of the God of Israel, had to be binding. A compromise was made; the Gibeonites would be kept safe but would be assigned to the work of woodcutting and water carrying for the whole community. This would include providing for the tabernacle for sacrifices and for ritual cleansing; perhaps Joshua hoped that involvement in Israel's worship might cultivate the Gibeonites' faith in God! It is a fact that their chief city, Gibeon, became the site of the tabernacle up to the reign of Solomon. In the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, designated a Levitical town and only 13 kilometres from Jerusalem, it was to hold a significant place in Israel's history.

Gibeon indeed was an important city, like one of the royal cities, and their capitulation to Israel was enough to scare Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem into making an alliance with another 4 kings in an effort to subdue Israel at last. Chapter 10 tells how all 5 kings went to Gibeon on the attack. Gibeon immediately appealed to Israel to help in the light of their treaty, so Joshua marched to the fight with his entire army, including all the best fighting men. God encouraged him with a promise of complete victory. After an all-night march Joshua took the 5 kings by surprise and they were thrown into confusion before Israel. In verse 11 "the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky, and more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites."

And God helped in another amazing way. Joshua saw that time was against him to complete the victory and in desperation he called on the Lord, in verses 14-12, to let the sun and the moon stand still to give him light enough to finish the job given to him. And God in His grace agreed. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. 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!

This victory over the nations in the centre of Canaan gave Joshua a good lever to move southward, and to conquer king after king in one campaign, until the whole southern region was subdued. At this -

Chapter 11 - Jabin king of Hazor rallied several other kings of the north against Israel, but again God gave Joshua complete victory. While these enemy armies were completely exterminated, it seems that often people from the lower classes escaped into hiding and later emerged to continue their own pagan way of life, becoming thorns in the sides of Israel as she struggled to establish a Godly society.

In the meantime, after all Joshua's victories, which took 7 years, we read in chapter 11:23 "then the land had rest from war." Now it was time for the land to be allotted to the various tribes. Chapter 12 gives a list of the defeated kings - 31 of them, plus the 2 on the eastern side of Jordan, Og and Sihon, vanquished earlier by the army under Moses.

And here it is appropriate to give an account of one outstanding Israeli, Caleb, a stalwart friend of Joshua and a leader of the tribe of Judah. Apart from Joshua, he was the only one of the 12 spies sent to explore Canaan who had believed God's word that He would give them victory over the Canaanites. Of course, there was much to daunt them; this land was crowded, and lay across one of the great highways of trade and travel in the ancient world, with Egypt keeping a watchful eye on the various nations. Yet Caleb believed God's promise and God honoured his faith; of the 12 spies Caleb and Joshua were the only 2 to survive and enter the Promised Land.

The land was quiet after the wars and in the process of being subdivided among the tribes. In Joshua chapter 14, verse 6 onward, Caleb reminds Joshua of God's promise through Moses that 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." Now at 85 and still full of vigour, Caleb grasps the challenge to inherit this rough hill country which is still occupied by the large and fearsome Anakites, rather than just to occupy the easier lowlands, simply because "the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as He said." Joshua granted his request and Caleb was soon in possession of Hebron. An interesting postscript in chapter 15:15-19 shows that Caleb's daughter was as strong-minded as her dad, and not afraid to ask for a lot!

Chapters 13 to 20 set out the various land allotments given to the 12 tribes, Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh making a total of 13, reduced to 12 again as the Levites were not given any tribal land because it was their privilege and duty to care for the worship of God through the Tabernacle, and that was their inheritance. However in Chapter 21 the other tribes were instructed to give the Levites towns and pasturelands out of their own inheritance so that the Levites would be provided for: theirs also was part of the meat offered as sacrifices in the Tabernacle. Of the 48 towns given to the Levites, 6 were designated Cities of Refuge, mentioned earlier as safe havens for perpetrators of accidental killings - appropriate as priests were the appointed judges of the nation. The towns - Hebron, Shechem, Golan, Kedesh, Bezer and Ramoth, were in strategic places throughout the land. Verses 43-45 is a splendid summary of the grace and faithfulness of God, where "not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled."

Today it is part of our service to God that we adequately support our pastors and full-time workers in mission - a good Israelite example set by God!

Chapter 23 begins, "After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then old ... summoned all Israel", reminding them of all that God had done for them and urging them to be strong and unswerving in their devotion to God and His Word. In verse 14 he reminds them, "You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled, not one has failed." At Shechem the Covenant was renewed and the Israelites promised to serve and obey the Lord.

There were several sacred days in their calendar, which served to remind them of how God had led them, but also pointing to the eventual fulfilment of the covenant in Jesus Christ. Starting with the Passover, the lamb had to be sacrificed, just as Jesus died on the cross for our salvation. Then for the next 7 days they ate unleavened bread and with leaven representing sin, this pointed out that Christ's death had taken away our sin. Two days after the sacrifice was the feast of the Firstfruits – and with Jesus dying on Friday, Jesus was the “firstfruits” from the dead (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20) as He rose again on the Sunday. Fifty days after that was the Festival of Weeks, or Pentecost, the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, which we now know as the beginning of the Church on earth. All these festivals were to be times of feasting, thanksgiving and joy.

Every 7th day there was to be a Sabbath which gave them, their servants and their livestock rest from their labours and the leisure to contemplate and worship God. Every 7th year the land was to rest as well, a reminder that it was still God's, and they were stewards under His sovereignty. Then every 50th year was to be a Jubilee, a time for re-aligning any disparities and bringing liberty throughout the land. All land was to revert to its original owners, all debts were cancelled and slaves were set free. Like all other God-given civil laws these were for the purpose of maintaining a successful yet compassionate society. Never have they been excelled.

Isaiah chapter 61 relates the Year of Jubilee to the Year of the Lord's Favour and the coming of the Messiah. Jesus extends and applies it to himself in Luke 4:18,19 – “the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” Yet he did not finish the quotation, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” That is still to come. He came to offer immediate peace and favour but for those who will not accept him, judgement awaits.

Knowing his departure was near, Joshua called the people together once more, urging them to remain true to their God and even at the age of 110, pledging in 24:15, “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” I guess he is enjoying serving God still in His heavenly household!