

March 15

Joshua 22

Joshua 23 and 24

The passage you read today recounted for us the end of the wars of conquest, terminated officially by the demobilization of the army, and the release of the troops for the two-and-a-half tribes who had chosen to settle their families on the other side of the Jordan.

First, I want to draw your attention to the fact that for a long time - probably about seven years - these soldiers had fought and served without complaint along side their brothers. Seven years is a long time to be almost continuously absent from home and family, but there is no record anywhere in the book of Joshua of any rebellion or murmuring among these troops. I am pointing this out because I think that it would be possible, in light of the several references we have noted in the Book of Joshua, to conclude that because the Israelites (except for Caleb) did not completely drive out the Canaanites, that somehow they were a very disobedient and slack people. I think that perhaps we are tempted to think that way because the generation before them and, (as we shall soon enough see), the generation after them were both slack and disobedient. But we need to realize that the Israelites of Joshua's generation - despite the fact that they did not completely drive out the enemy - were devout, obedient, non-complaining, persevering, loyal followers of God. The whole Book of Joshua does not contain even one incident of large-scale rebellion against the Lord. These were godly people, and they accomplished - because of their faith - enormous things for God, and experienced - because of their obedience - wonderful blessing from His hand. In fact, this might be the single most godly group of people we meet anywhere in the Word of God. They weren't perfect - they didn't obey completely - but they were a people hungry for God.

The next indication of the kind of people we are dealing with, is seen in the action taken by the two-and-one-half tribes, in building the altar on the border of Canaan to memorialize their oneness with the other tribes, and their commitment to worship and serve the Lord.

Ironically, the third indicator of the high level of spirituality in the nation of Israel at this time was to be found in the adverse and immediate reaction of the other nine-and-a-half tribes, when they discovered that their compatriots had built what seemed to them an unauthorized and rebellious altar by the river. They had just demobilized after 47 years of military discipline and life and, because they believed that the honor of the Lord was at stake, they immediately sounded the alarm, formed marching ranks and struck out to fight yet another battle. There was no difficulty at all in raising a national alarm and fielding an army, just to avenge a slight against the honor of God. We haven't been at war for seven years and we haven't sacrificed the comforts of a pleasant home and life for all of our lives. We haven't been called upon to do much of anything, but when God's honor is impugned in our presence and society, when He is mocked and ridiculed and slandered in our very presence, we are not often seen as

being ready to jealously defend His honor and glory. These people were jealous (our modern word would be "zealous") for God.

The next lesson we can glean from the misunderstanding that developed over the altar of memorial which the two-and-a-half tribes built at Geliloth has to do with the ease with which misunderstandings and divisions are created within the body of Christ. When the word got out that the altar had been built at Geliloth, the Israelites whose inheritance was west of the Jordan River immediately jumped to the conclusion that their brothers were setting up a separate and novel system of worship, dishonoring God, and creating schism in the religion of Israel. They didn't send messengers to inquire about what was really happening. They published the news that the two-and-a-half tribes had rebelled, and they marched immediately to confront and do battle. Fortunately, an opportunity for the eastern tribes to explain their actions was given. But how close they came to an unnecessary conflict, that would have made enemies out of brothers, for generations to come.

Now this last thing that I want for us to see about chapter 22 relates to the instructions Joshua gave to the two-and-a-half tribes at the point at which they departed for their homes. He tells them that basically they are to do five things.

- 1) Keep the commandments and the law.
- 2) He tells them to love the Lord.
- 3) They were to walk in all His ways.
- 4) They were to obey all His commands.
- 5) Hold fast to Him and **serve** Him.

Really, all these commands boil down to just three simple words - obey, love and serve. Those are three very significant words for the life of any who would seek to follow God.

#### Joshua 23 and 24

Joshua reminds them over and over again of what the Lord has done. There is one expression in chapter 23 that I love, and I want you to remember it, because it encapsulates a powerful principle of God's Word, and because we will have occasion to come back to it again as we move through the pages of the Old Testament and the history of the Christian church. He reminds them that no one has been able to stand against Israel and he says, *"One of you routs a thousand because the Lord your God fights for you."* All through Scripture, this wonderful principle is demonstrated. Friends, when we stand on the word and the promise of God, even if we stand completely alone, we need fear no enemy. We are in control. We will triumph.

It is evident from this passage, that one thing does concern Joshua here, and it is the lingering presence of those other nations. Seven times he mentions them, recalling the victories God has given over them, promising that God will push the remnants out of the land, and warning Israel of the consequences of mixing in with them and adopting their values and ways. The great danger to Israel, and especially to the next generation who would not have lived through the conquest and experienced all the mighty acts of God in a personal way, was the danger of compromise with the world. Unfortunately, as we will soon discover, Joshua's grave concerns were very well justified, as Israel became comfortable with less than everything that God had promised, allowing the Canaanites to stay on in the land. Soon enough, the intermarrying began, the compromises started, and the slippery slope gave way to a fast downhill slide. But it would not have had to happen that way!! In fact, in chapter 23, Joshua gives us a three-fold formula to safeguard against spiritual backsliding. This is so important to us, because none of us is immune from this very same phenomenon of backsliding.

The first antidote he mentions is the antidote of obeying the Word of God. Focusing our lives on learning and obeying God's Word will always be a centerpiece in the strategy for spiritual success.

The second antidote to spiritual failure that Joshua mentions is separation. Joshua actually says, *"Do not associate with the nations that remain among you."*

The third great safeguard against apostasy is the greatest of all. It is this: *"Be very careful to love the Lord your God."* The most important commandment of all - Jesus said it - is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind.

Joshua warned his people that if they failed in these things, apostasy would follow and it would bring its own set of consequences. The first consequence of apostasy according to Joshua is defeat. *"The Lord your God will no longer drive out the nations before you."* Next he said that backsliding would bring great discomfort as the nations would then become *"Snares and traps before you - whips on your back and thorns in your eyes."* Finally, backsliding will bring disgrace and later ruin as the *"Lord will bring on you all the evil He has threatened until He has destroyed you from this good land He has given you."*

The most interesting and sobering thing about chapter 24 is the fact that the avowals of the children of Israel, that they will serve the Lord, are met by a simple and disturbing statement of fact on the part of Joshua - *"You are not able to serve the Lord your God."* But it is true - and it's just as true for us as it was for them. If we, like Israel, attempt to keep God's covenant laws in our own strength, we will fail just as badly as they did! By the power of the indwelling spirit of Christ, however, we, like Paul, can say, *"It is no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me."*

The second thing that we know is that choosing to follow God is not a one-time decision. Israel had declared their loyalty to God many times before. Choosing to obey God is a daily decision. We need each day to cry out with Joshua, *"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."*