

Truth for Today

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The Land and the Warfare

Today's talk, "The Land and the Warfare", concludes our series of lessons from the journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to the land God promised them, Canaan. Many hymn writers have seen Canaan as a picture of heaven to which all Christians are moving through this wilderness life upon earth. There are numerous encouraging songs such as "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah" in which heaven is anticipated. Words like "land me safe on Canaan's side" adequately express the Christian's faith and hope in God. Christians rightly view heaven, the Promised Land, as the place of ultimate rest. On this theme I have a favourite hymn, which contains these sentiments:

*"On to Canaan's rest still wending,
E'en thy wants and woes shall bring
Suited grace from high descending,
Thou shalt taste of mercy's spring.*

*Then to Canaan's long-loved dwelling
Love divine thy foot shall bring,
There with shouts of triumph swelling,
Zion's songs in rest to sing,*

*There no stranger-God shall meet thee,
Stranger thou in courts above.
He who to His rest shall greet thee,
Greets thee with a well-known love."*

But our title is not just "The Land", it's "The Land and the Warfare", because conflict was the immediate experience of the children of Israel when they entered Canaan. Their wars with the Canaanite inhabitants of the land are recorded in the book of Joshua. They only got to possess and enjoy those parts of Canaan that they successfully fought for. Now we know that in heaven all conflict will be over and there will be eternal rest and perpetual peace. Hence this final stage of the journey of these Israelites illustrates not only the final destiny for believers, but also some of the great subjects of the Epistle to the Ephesians in the New Testament - the heavenly, spiritual inheritances and the Christian conflict.

Let's divide the talk up into these two parts: "The Land" picturing the heavenly places in Christ; and "The Warfare" picturing the conflicts which Christians experience in the activity of possessing their "spiritual blessings". These two aspects of the spiritual truths are brought together in Ephesians 6:12, which is a text for this talk: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

The Land

Canaan was promised to the children of Israel as a land of plenty before they even set out on their long journey: "... the LORD said [to Moses]: 'I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt ... so I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them ... to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites ...'" Exodus 3:7-8. This definition of the Promised Land became a watchword to them that kept them going during their forty years of wanderings in the wilderness. For Christians, "a land flowing with milk and honey" is one of the illustrations of the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ, which Paul states, in Ephesians 1:3, is a reason for praising God.

When Joshua arrived at the banks of the Jordan, following the death of Moses, God described the land to him in terms of its natural boundaries: "...go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them - the children of Israel...From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory," Joshua 1:2 and 4. No doubt Joshua was encouraged to know that these imposing natural barriers protected this wonderful land. Therefore his people would be safe dwelling in it, surrounded in this way by these defences. In Paul's second prayer for the

saints at Ephesus, he describes the heavenly counterpart to the physical land of Canaan also in terms of "boundaries": "...the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge..." 3:18-19. From this we see that Christians are enclosed in, and protected by, the thoughts and purposes of God the Father for them; but the love of Christ is boundless!

Sometimes Christian teachers present the land of Egypt that the Israelites left as a picture of the present world system with all its pleasures and idolatry; and with its people dominated by the prince of this world, Satan. Egypt was a desert, irrigated by water from its rivers, but Canaan was altogether a different place - it was provided with rain from heaven: "For the land which you go in to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot, as a vegetable garden; but the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven, a land for which the LORD your God cares; the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year" Deuteronomy 11:10-12. The water of Canaan is a picture of the Holy Spirit given to believers. In John's Gospel 7:38-39, Jesus said: "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water." He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive... The Spirit of God provides the believer with those other world experiences: the enjoyment of all that God has brought us into in Christ. As Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13-14: "...having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance..."

The Holy Spirit gives us the capacity and the power to enjoy "...every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ," Ephesians 1:3. The food, cities, towns and places that the children of Israel found in Canaan, in addition to its geological features, illustrate these spiritual delights. It was "a good and large land," as well as "a land flowing with milk and honey," Exodus 3:8; "...a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will lack nothing...When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you." Deuteronomy 8:8-10. Response to God is also the true spiritual experience of Christians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" Ephesians 1:3.

The Warfare

The warfare of the children of Israel had to do with fighting the inhabitants of Canaan, gaining victories, dispossessing them, and taking over their lands, towns and cities. By contrast, Christians 'stand' in the victory of Christ and fight the spiritual battle of faith using the "whole armour of God," Ephesians 6:13, to possess their possessions.

The book of Joshua records these battles for Canaan. It divides into three main parts:

1. Israel's entrance into Canaan: 1:1 to 5:15
2. The Conquest of Canaan: 6:1 to 12:24
3. The Division of Canaan: 13:1 to 24:33

The entry victories of the children of Israel, at Jericho and Ai, are well-known stories. The preludes, in Joshua 5, to this mighty military campaign by Joshua are also important. After crossing Jordan, and setting up camp at Gilgal, re-instituting the rite of circumcision, celebrating the Passover, and eating the produce of the land, Joshua goes out to survey the imposing city of Jericho. Suddenly he was found alone with a Man with a sword in His hand, who declares Himself to be the "Commander of the army of the LORD". Joshua and Israel went forward in the knowledge that the LORD would be fighting for them! Here then is the starting point for Christian warfare, to realise the Lord Jesus is for us: "...be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might," Paul exhorts the Ephesians in 6:10. In the conflict for spiritual blessings in heavenly places the Christian goes in the strength of Christ our glorified Head, seen by faith: "...Christ...raised from the dead and seated...at [God's] right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" Ephesians 1:20-21.

The victory of Joshua and Israel at Jericho, when the "walls fell down flat" illustrate the fact that Christians can overcome every spiritual opposition against them: "...we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our [Christian] warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

The key to victory is obedience to the Word of God, as the next battle, at Ai, with its accompanying defeat, illustrates. Joshua had briefed his troops about Jericho: "...you, by all means abstain from the accursed things" Joshua 6:18. But Joshua 7:1 opens with the words: "But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan...took of the accursed things." Defeat and the death of thirty-six warriors at Ai were followed by dismay in the camp at Gilgal. In the subsequent court martial, Achan was found guilty of covetousness: "I saw...I coveted...I took...I hid," he confessed about his booty. In the words of Ephesians 6:11 he had not "put on the whole armour of God" and

had allowed sin to take control of him. The spiritual hosts of wickedness use sin as a weapon against believers. Strength to overcome indwelling sin is by seeking: "...those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind [affections] on things above, not on things on the earth...Therefore put to death your members which are on earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry...in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth...and put on the new man" Colossians 3:1-10.

Ai was easily defeated once Achan had been dealt with in the Valley of Achor, see Joshua 7 and 8. The book of the Law of Moses was then established upon Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. A military campaign then was planned for the South of Canaan, where various armies had joined forces against Israel. However, Joshua and the rulers of Israel were deceived by the Gibeonites, Joshua 9, even before the southern campaign had started. These inhabitants of Gibeon "worked craftily" and came to the camp at Gilgal pretending to be from a far country. They established a covenant with Israel who "did not seek counsel of the LORD" and who therefore did not discover until it was too late that the Gibeonites were actually "near neighbours." These Gibeonites illustrate for us "the wiles of the devil" mentioned in Ephesians 6:11, and reveal to us the very devious tactics of this enemy of the people of God. Again Israel failed to put on the whole armour of God - perhaps dependent prayer was the piece that was missing on this occasion.

There followed a battle in the south of Canaan, which stands out as a remarkable event in the history of the world, as well as in Israel. The five kings of the Amorites were routed by the LORD before Israel, following an all-night march of about 20 miles from the camp at Gilgal. The battle raged all day, but as evening approached the fleeing confederacy thought they could retreat to their fortified cities for the night. Joshua realised the urgency of the situation and made that unique request to the LORD that daylight might be prolonged: "Sun stand still over Gibeon". Note the poignancy of the divine record: "So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the people had revenge upon their enemies. Is it not written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. And there has been no day like that, before it or after it, that the LORD heeded the voice of a man; for the LORD fought for Israel" Joshua 10:12-14. Joshua then went forward, 'strong in the Lord and in the power of His might,' and completely conquered the remainder of the south of Canaan.

The return of the whole army to Gilgal from Gibeon and again at the end of the southern campaign, Joshua 10:15 and 43, is significant. This was the place where the children of Israel accepted that they were finally cut off from Egypt, by the reintroduction of circumcision. Their return would remind them that the LORD had "rolled away the reproach of Egypt," Joshua 5:9, and that in this battle, as in every other, it was not their military prowess, but God's power, which had given them the victory. Christians should have "no confidence in the flesh," see Philippians 3:3. Perhaps this humble attitude is most at risk immediately following some success in the spiritual warfare. It's easy to be deceived by the flesh to think that I won the battle, when it was really won by the Lord! Self-judgement is a constant requirement "to be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" Ephesians 6:13.

Canaan was finally conquered after the prosecution of the long campaign for the North, see Joshua 11. The outcome is recorded in 11:23, "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had said to Moses; and Joshua gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Then the land rested from war." Chapter 12 follows with the list of kings smitten by Israel under Moses on the east side of Jordan, as well as the list of kings smitten by Israel under Joshua on the west side of Jordan.

In the next division of the book of Joshua, chapters 13-24, the conquered land is shared out, each tribe receiving its inheritance. This was done by Joshua when he was very old at the command of the LORD, and when there were still many battles to be fought and won, Joshua 13:1-7. The dividing up of the land and the details of the places and cities that each tribe received is very informative about the spiritual blessings that Christians can possess. In an overall sense: "...the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it...not a man of all their enemies stood against them...Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass" Joshua 21:43-45. But they needed to ask and fight for it person-by-person, tribe-by-tribe. For example, Caleb asked to be given Hebron, a stronghold of the Anakim, some of the giants in the territory, see Joshua 14 and 15. He took it by force and then gave "the upper springs and the lower springs," Joshua 15:19, to his daughter when she asked for springs of water. Hebron means "communion" and would speak to Christians of this supreme spiritual blessing they have with God their Father. The springs of water would remind us again of the presence of the Holy Spirit, by whom we have access to the Father, Ephesians 2:18.

We can now summarise the main points of this talk:

1. Canaan, in the earthly history of the children of Israel, corresponds to "heavenly places" in the spiritual teaching of Ephesians.
2. The grapes of Eschol, and all the other lovely fruits and places of Canaan, correspond to the "spiritual blessings" of Ephesians.

3. The waters of Canaan, the rain from heaven, correspond to the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer in Christ, making good these spiritual blessings, and giving a foretaste of heaven.
4. The wars of Israel for Canaan correspond to the Christian warfare that Paul wrote about in Ephesians 6:10-20, from which verse 12 has been the text for today.

In concluding this talk on “The Land and The Warfare”, it is necessary to face the challenges of God’s word. First of all, when I hear the LORD say in Joshua 13:1, “...there remains very much land yet to be possessed,” I ask myself how many of the rich spiritual blessings am I missing out on through lack of diligence in the things of God? Would Joshua have to admonish me as he did Israel: “How long will you neglect to go and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers has given you?” Joshua 18:3. Secondly, when we read in Joshua 22 that two and a half tribes returned to their inheritance on the eastern side of Jordan, the challenge is raised: Am I satisfied with a comfortable life in this world without any conflict in the heavenly places, rather like the house of Joseph who were reluctant to fight for the mountain country, Joshua 17:14-18?

Let’s pray.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” Lord Jesus, help us to be strong in You and in the power of Your might; and to have put on all the armour of God for these battles in this evil day. And for Your great Name’s sake, grant us to remain steadfast. Amen.

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