

## A Fitting Challenge Joshua 18:1-10

The land was subdued. That's what verse 1 says, and it's no exaggeration. Because of Joshua's campaigns in the south and north of the Promised Land, described vividly in chapters 10 and 11, the back of the Canaanites' military power had indeed been broken. But in order for God's people to settle down in their new homes, each tribe and clan still needed to root out the remnants of the resistance within their allotted areas. So, why hadn't the tribes of Benjamin, Simeon, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and Dan done that? Why hadn't these seven tribes taken possession of their inheritance?

Well, why haven't we done the same thing as individuals? After all, Jesus has broken the power of sin and death in our lives, right? He has washed us with His blood and clothed us with His righteousness, right? So, why haven't we made more progress in our sanctification, the process of becoming more like Him? Why do we still struggle against the remnants of sin within us? Why don't we more consistently love God and love other people in our daily lives?

And why haven't we made more progress as a congregation? Why aren't we more active in evangelism? There are no laws holding us back. Our Federal and state constitutions guarantee us the freedom to believe in Christ and to tell people about Him without fear of government reprisal, unlike our brothers and sisters who live in countries dominated by Islam or Communism. And we don't have to pay tax money to support a denomination that we don't belong to, like in many European countries. No, we can wholeheartedly support the EPC, and take advantage of its resources to help us. So, what's the holdup?

Well, why weren't these seven tribes more active in taking up their own inheritance? It's likely that they didn't think they were big or strong enough. After all, in verse 5, Joshua mentions the tribe of Judah, which had already been allotted a large area in the South. He mentions the house of Joseph, which was so large it was divided into two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, whose territory sprawled across the northern part of the Promised Land, even stretching east across the Jordan River. How could these seven smaller tribes hope to achieve similar success?

And it's easy for us to look at the big churches up in Vicksburg or over in Jackson with the same mixture of envy and despair. For let's face it – church growth is a whole lot easier in places where there are lots of people. It's so much easier for big churches in big towns to provide children's ministries or to organize soup kitchens or construction projects or to open a clothes closet for the poor or even to coordinate flood relief. There's no way we could staff or pay for anything like that. So, how can we ever hope to make any real difference for the Kingdom of God?

In the same way, it's easy to look at our personal problems and shortcomings and fall into despair. How could we ever be as bold as Billy Graham or practice as much self-denial as Mother Teresa? We're just ordinary, everyday folks, doing our best just to get through the day, and giving into temptation way more often than we master it. We can't even conquer our own bad habits, so how could we possibly display Christ to the world?

But if we were to examine the rest of this chapter, we'd see that God wasn't expecting these seven tribes to conquer as much area as their more numerous cousins had. Just a glance at the number of column inches in our Bibles should prove this. It took all of chapter 15, and a long chapter at that, to

describe the territory of Judah. It took all of chapters 16 and 17 to describe the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh. In contrast, Benjamin gets only half of chapter 18. And it only takes one chapter to describe the territories of Simeon, Zebulon, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and Dan put together. Poor little Issachar gets only 2 column inches in my Bible, compared to 17 inches for Judah.

But that disparity should give us a lot of hope. For think about it: if some tribes were smaller than others, God gave them smaller portions of land to conquer. He gave them challenges that fit them, challenges that were appropriate for their size and strength.

And the same thing is true for us. No, we're not a megachurch, but we're not in a big city, either. We're plenty big for where we are, and we've got enough resources to handle at least some of the problems of where we live, if we devote them to God's glory and the good of others.

Think about it. Compare the size of this congregation to the population of this area. If you compare the 70 members we have to the population of Port Gibson, we make up a little less than 5%. A church of the same proportional size in Jackson would have to have 8500 members. That's way bigger than First Pres in Jackson. That's way bigger than Galloway Methodist. That may even be bigger than First Baptist! So, if those congregations can make an impact in their town, sure we can do something to advance the cause of Christ right here.

In the same way, each of us has our own individual challenges to face, our own road of sanctification to walk. But in the midst of our problems, all those who love and trust Jesus also have access to His power and authority. For what did He tell us in our responsive reading from John chapter 14? "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father."

In other words, even as we confront our most serious challenges, even as we face temptation, grief, disappointment, or despair, we are not alone. And we don't have to face even our most overwhelming problems in our own strength. No, Christ has risen from the dead and He has ascended to the right hand of the Father. All power is in His hands. And He will give us all the power we need to bring Him glory and to bear witness to Him. He even promised that we would be able to do the same sorts of things He did during His earthly ministry.

But come on. Can any of us really do what Jesus did? I mean, He didn't just understand all the Scriptures that the Old Testament people had – He spoke new words from God every time He opened His mouth! How can any of us possibly bear witness to God in the same way He did?

And the people of Joshua's time may have thought the same thing. After all, Joshua himself reminded the seven small tribes in verse 7 that the tribe of Levi was given the special task of being the priests of the Lord. Only they were allowed to offer the sacrifices and facilitate the worship in the Tabernacle. Only they could perform the rituals that provided the clearest picture of the Person and Work of Christ that anyone in those days could see.

In the same way, we Presbyterians are often hesitant to tell other people about Jesus. With our insistence that our pastors have seminary training, and with the lengthy examinations we give them to make sure they know the Bible as well as they love the Lord, it's easy for us to think that we should leave all the evangelism stuff up to them. And sometimes that leaves us thinking that there's really nothing ordinary, everyday Christians can do to expand the Kingdom of God.

But remember, just because the Levites were responsible for maintaining and operating the Tabernacle didn't exclude the rest of the people from participating in the worship of God. The people had to bring their sacrifices and their offerings. The people had to show up for the feasts. The people had to offer their prayers at the time of the morning and evening sacrifices.

And as this passage makes clear, it wasn't the Levites who were responsible for spreading the Kingdom of God throughout the Promised Land. No, that was the responsibility of all the rest of the tribes, even the smallest of them. In fact, Joshua makes it clear in verse 7 that the conquest of the land was something that the Levites weren't allowed to do.

In the same way, there's a very real sense in which ordinary, everyday church members are actually more effective at evangelism and church growth than we preachers are. Remember, our job is to equip you for ministry. That necessarily means we're spending time with you, teaching you, praying for you, visiting you when you're sick. Most preachers naturally spend most of our time with other believers.

But y'all have a different focus. Y'all are out in the world, coming into regular contact with all kinds of folks, many of whom aren't yet following the Lord Jesus. You thus have a better chance to model the Christian life before people who have never heard a sermon. You have a chance to speak the truth about Jesus to folks who would be uncomfortable talking to a preacher and who certainly wouldn't want to come to church. And think about this: when y'all invite folks to church, you can say, "Come with me, and sit with me." I can't do that – I sit up here.

And remember what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit in our responsive reading. He said that He would give the Holy Spirit to all Christians. He said that the Holy Spirit would guide all Christians into all the truth. He said the Holy Spirit would teach us all things and bring to our remembrance what He has told us.

Yes, we need trained pastors. Yes, there's real value in studying the Bible carefully so we can teach it to others. But it's also true that most of us already know enough about Jesus to tell others the most important things about Him. After all, if you know the Apostles' Creed – and we all recite it together every Lord's Day – you already know the basics. And the simple truths of the gospel related by someone who is living out those truths every day, showing as well as sharing the love and truth of Christ to people who know you and trust you – that will probably have more impact than any sermon I could preach.

So yes, in spite of all our weaknesses we all have access to the power of Christ. And all of us, regardless of our level of formal training, can know and demonstrate the truth of Christ. But let's face it – it's hard to get anything started, especially for us Presbyterians. "Let all things be done decently and in order" may be our favorite slogan, but it's followed closely by another: "We've always done it that way." We naturally find it easier to maintain programs and practices than to start new ones. We also find it easier to envy those who look like they already have their spiritual lives together than it is to do the hard work of sanctification in our own lives.

And it would have been easy for these seven small tribes to feel the same way. After all, Judah and Joseph had already begun to take up their inheritance. And in verse 7, Joshua reminds us that God,

Reuben and half the tribe of Manasseh had already conquered their allotted territories. But these seven tribes hadn't even started yet, and they had so far to go.

Just so, we have to admit that it is easier for big churches to get bigger, with all the ministries and programs they can provide. And it was also easier for earlier generations of Christians to do the work of evangelism and sanctification. After all, in the good old days, the cultural winds were at their back, going to church was the socially acceptable thing to do, Biblical morality was supported by the mass media, and families were generally intact. So, even if we have the power of Christ and even if we have the truth of Christ, how can we few possibly make a difference in our community in this very challenging time?

Well, let's look again at verse 10. For when Joshua cast lots to determine which of the seven small tribes got which piece of land, he was making it clear that God was ultimately in charge of the decision, that God was the one who set each particular challenge before each particular tribe. And the rest of chapter 18 goes on to explain that every one of those tribes received a different challenge, a different part of the Promised Land to conquer.

In the same way, God has placed each of us, God has placed this congregation in this particular place at this particular time. And the fact is that every place and every time has its own blessings and its own difficulties.

Sure, it might be easier to grow a church in places like Madison County or Rankin County where there are lots of people moving in. But in some ways it's harder in those places, because there aren't any established social connections, and no one knows anyone else. It's a lot harder to love your neighbors when you don't know your neighbors.

And yes, back when our ancestors built this building there was a general social consensus about right and wrong, about family structure and sexual morality. And there was a general expectation that church attendance was a good thing. It was easier in some ways to spread the gospel in those days.

But let's be honest: there was also an equally strong consensus that black folks just weren't worth as much as white folks, and that white folks and black folks shouldn't go to the same schools, and that the way black folks prefer to worship was somehow less worthy, or less valid. And those beliefs compromised the message of love that our ancestors were trying to proclaim, making that message harder to believe.

So, sure, our generation of Mississippians may struggle more with cultural sins related to sex, but at least we don't have to worry about all those sins related to race. Or to put it more bluntly, black folks don't have to be afraid of being lynched, and white folks don't have to be afraid of having black friends, or going down to Alcorn State to watch a football game or a basketball game. And we can all enjoy watching Gebreal Samaha, who's from Khenchara, Lebanon, play basketball for the Valley Delta Devils, or watching Breein Tyree play for the Ole Miss Rebels, even if the State fans aren't exactly happy about the 40 points he scored against them last week.

Yes, God has given us both the blessing and the challenge of living in Southwest Mississippi in 2020, the blessing and the challenge of being part of a small church in a largely rural area, the blessing and the challenge of following Jesus in an increasingly diverse but also increasingly secular world. So, as Joshua told these seven small tribes in verse 8, let us walk through the land God has given us. Let's take

a good, honest look at the gifts God has given us, as well as the needs and difficulties all around us. Let's examine both our blessings and our challenges.

And then let's do what he urged those seven small tribes to do in verse 3 – let's take possession of our inheritance. Let's pray for more of the Holy Spirit's power and truth so that we might pursue greater sanctification and so that we might be better equipped for evangelism. And then, however few we are, let's show and share Christ with all those around us, however few they may be. Could it be that Jesus would choose to do what He promised, and accomplish great things through us?