

After the Battle
Joshua 21:43-22:9

“Today the guns are silent. A great tragedy has ended. A great victory has been won. The skies no longer rain death – the seas bear only commerce. Men everywhere walk upright in the sunlight. The entire world is quietly at peace. The holy mission has been completed.” These were the words of General Douglas MacArthur on September 2, 1945, after accepting the surrender of the Japanese Imperial Forces aboard the Battleship Missouri, and bringing the Second World War to an end – that was 75 years ago.

And by the end of chapter 21, the people of Israel were experiencing the same sort of joy and relief. Verse 44 says that they were finally at rest. After a long struggle, none of their enemies continued to stand before them. The great campaigns in which the Israelite armies had swept through the south and then the north of the Promised Land were completed. Now came the time to divide the spoils and the land, and to rejoice over a job well done.

And just as in 1945, victory was due as much to effective alliances as it was to hard fighting. Without the combination of Russian manpower, British seapower, and American agricultural and industrial power, it’s hard to see how the Axis of Germany, Italy and Japan could have been defeated. And it was just as important for the men of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh to participate in the conquest of the land west of the Jordan, even though they themselves would end up living on the eastern side of that river.

And no alliance can possibly be maintained unless the parties trust one another. Back in 1946, Winston Churchill spoke of the special relationship the United Kingdom and the United States had, a partnership that had enabled our two countries to achieve victory in two world wars. A generation previously, on July 4, 1917, as the United States was sending its first soldiers to France to fight in the first of those wars, Colonel Charles Stanton stood before the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette, and recalled another special relationship, the debt Americans owe to the people of France who helped us secure our own independence back in 1781. Stanton said,

“America has joined forces with the Allied Powers, and what we have of blood and treasure are yours. Therefore it is that with loving pride we drape the colors in tribute of respect to this citizen of your great republic. And here and now, in the presence of the illustrious dead, we pledge our hearts and our honor in carrying this war to a successful issue. Lafayette, we are here.”

In a similar way, the men of Reuben and Gad and Manasseh had solemnly promised to help their brothers secure their inheritance on the western side of the Jordan. Back in Numbers 32, they made a vow: “We will not return unto our houses until the children of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance.” They told Moses, “Thy servants will pass over, every man armed for war, before the Lord to battle.”

And now, as we turn the page to Joshua 22, we see that they had kept their promise – they had demonstrated themselves to be worthy of trust. As Joshua said in verses 2 and 3, they had kept their promise to Moses. They had been obedient to Joshua and the rest of their military leaders. And most importantly, they had kept their promise to God.

Yes, they had fought, and fought hard. They had helped their brothers take up their inheritance, and they had proven themselves trustworthy, faithful to God and man. And now it was time for them to enter into a well-deserved rest.

And maybe at this stage of your life, you can look back at some victories of your own. Maybe you're proud of your own military or law enforcement career, the way you helped keep other people safe. Maybe you look with pride on the achievements of your students or your children or grandchildren. Maybe you remember folks you cared for when they were sick or needy folks whose homes you repaired, or young folks you helped get a good start in life.

These, and so many others, are all ways we can love and serve God, ways we can reveal the Christian faith to be vibrant and strong in our lives. No, we don't earn our salvation because we have invested our time, talent, and treasure in such good works – Heaven isn't a payoff for living a good life. But what did we read responsively from Philippians 2:12 this morning? "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." That means it is in fact a good thing for such good works to flow out of the salvation God has already given us, for such generosity and kindness to others to be a natural response to the way God has saved us and made us His own.

And that leads us to the second main point we can draw out of today's passage. For if we can and should rejoice in the way that God has allowed us to serve Him and serve others in the past, we must continue those efforts of love and service in the present and into the future. For the sobering truth is that after any war is won, the peace must be won as well. And sometimes that's a whole lot harder to do.

Think about World War I. It ended on November 11, 1918, and President Wilson promised that it would make the world safe for democracy. But twenty years later, Europe would erupt in violence once again, and World War II would spread even farther around the globe. By the time MacArthur spoke those words in Tokyo Bay, more people had died than in any other war in history.

For it turns out that the terms of peace that ended World War I fanned the flames of hatred and resentment in a defeated and humiliated Germany. But at the same time Britain, France and the United States lost interest in maintaining their own military power, which would have deterred future aggression. It turned out it was a lot harder to keep the peace than it had been to win the war.

And we find the same principle in today's passage. For what did Joshua tell this victorious army of Reubenites, Gadites, and Manassites, these men who had fought hard and were now going home to rest? Look at verse 5: he told them to keep the commandments and the law of Moses. He told them to love the Lord and to serve Him with all their heart and soul, not just as soldiers in battle, but as ordinary people in their everyday lives.

And that's tough, isn't it? I mean, it's one thing to muster up your energy and enthusiasm for a special mission trip or project. It's one thing to deny yourself for a limited period of time, like many folks do during Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter. But to put other people ahead of yourself every day, all day long? To put God first in everything we say and think and feel and do all the time? To cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and put the remnants of sin to death in our lives with every single choice we make? That's tough.

But that's the challenge Paul set before us in Philippians chapter 2, isn't it? He wanted us to be blameless and innocent, children of God without reproach, even if we have to live among a crooked and perverse generation. He wanted us to shine like lights in a dark world, holding fast the word of life in the face of sin and death all around us.

That sort of consistent Christian living requires the same sort of persistence, the same sort of determination, the same sort of dedication that the Allies needed so desperately between the two world wars. So if they shirked their responsibilities, if they rejected the challenges they faced, if they dropped the ball, how can we hope to do any better? How can we possibly emulate either the heroic feats that the men of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh accomplished or the steady, daily faithfulness to which Joshua challenged them?

Well, let's look back at our passage from Joshua. For Who was really responsible for all the great victories of all God's people? 21:43 says that it was the Lord Who gave them the land they had conquered. 21:44 says that it was the Lord Who had delivered their enemies into their hands, giving them victory. The same verse says that it was the Lord Who thus gave them the rest that they were enjoying, and Joshua makes the same point in 22:4. Over and over, this passage makes it clear that it was God Who was ultimately responsible even for the great things His people had accomplished on the battlefield.

And the same thing is true for all of us as well. Sure, we're all called to put the remnants of sin to death in our lives each and every day. But we can only do this because, through His death and resurrection, Jesus has destroyed the power of sin and death. Sure, we're all called to demonstrate the light and the truth of Christ in our lives, putting God and other people ahead of ourselves. But it's only because Jesus has given His Holy Spirit to live within all who trust in Him, that we are able to live His life of selfless service and unconditional love.

How did Paul put it in Philippians 2? Yes, he told us to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling, to keep God's holiness and righteousness in mind as we make our daily decisions about how we should live, doing good works as a way of thanking God for the salvation He has given us in Christ. But in the very next verse, Paul insists that it is in fact God Who is at work in all those who trust in Christ, helping us want what He wants, enabling us to do what it is that He wants us to do.

And so we see that all our victories, all our accomplishments for the Lord are actually the result of a partnership with God. God is doing the work in us, even while we are working as hard as we can to do His will. And the more God works in us to will what He wills while we do what He does, the more we should give God the credit for the things He accomplishes through us.

But how can we be sure that God will in fact do all of this for us? How do we know God will in fact empower us to persevere in the Christian life, putting others before ourselves and bringing Him glory in all that we say and do?

Well, look back at our Joshua passage one more time. For why did the Lord give His Old Testament people victory in battle? Why did He give them the land on both sides of the Jordan River? Verses 43 and 44 say that He had sworn to give that land to their ancestors – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And verse 45 reminds us that He had made that promise to Joshua's generation as well – God had said He

would lead them into the Promised Land, and that's exactly what He did. There wasn't a single good thing that God had promised to them that He hadn't given them.

So how much more confidence should we have today? For God hasn't just brought us out of slavery in Egypt – He has sent His Son to redeem us from the power of sin and death by His sacrifice on the cross. And God hasn't just given us a place to live this earthly life – the Father has raised Jesus from the dead to prove that we too will rise from our own graves one day. So when Jesus promises to come again on that day and take us to Himself, we can believe that. And when Jesus promises to fill our hearts with His Spirit, to bring our desires into line with His own, and to empower us to put the remnants of sin to death in our lives each and every day, well, we can believe that too.

So, yes, we can rest in the certainty of Christ's completed work in us. But at the same time, let's pray that God would consecrate us to His service, filling us with His Spirit so that our wills might truly be lost in His, so that as children of God we might show His light to the world.