

Liberating the Land Joshua 23

On this date in 1945, World War II was not yet won. Oh, Hitler was finished in Europe. He had taken his own life on April 30, and the pitiful remnants of the Third Reich, the German government which he had boasted would last for a thousand years, had surrendered to the Western Allies on May 7 and to the Soviets on May 9.

But the warlords were still very much in charge of Japan. Oh, they no longer dreamed of expanding what they called the “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” to cover the entire Pacific Basin. No, by this date 75 years ago, the British and Americans had sunk most of the Imperial Navy and were back in control of Manila. B-29 bombers based first in the Marianas, and by April on Iwo Jima were incinerating the major cities of Japan one by one. The conquest of Okinawa on June 22 provided yet another unsinkable base for American air operations, as well as an ideal staging area for a naval invasion of Japan.

But 5,000 U.S. Marines had had to die to clear the 23,000 Japanese soldiers from Iwo Jima. And even though U.S. Forces landed on Okinawa on March 31, it had taken until June 22 for 103,000 soldiers and 88,000 Marines to eliminate Japanese resistance from an area covering only 466 square miles – that’s smaller than Claiborne County at 501. And it had cost the Americans 82,000 casualties, including 12,500 killed in action, to gain control of that small island. And the much larger, much more populous Japanese home islands still had to be defeated. Oh, no. The final outcome of the conflict with Japan may have been determined. But the war was by no means finished.

The Ancient Israelites found themselves in a similar situation at the time Joshua gave this speech. As he reminds us in verse 3, it had been a glorious campaign up to that point. Truly God had fought for His people – stopping up the flooded Jordan River so the people could cross it on dry ground, causing the mighty walls of Jericho to collapse as the people looked on and cheered, hurling hailstones from Heaven on the enemy armies at Gibeon, while at the same time making the sun stand still in the sky for a whole extra day to allow the Israelites to achieve an even greater victory. Joshua was not exaggerating in verse 4 when he said that the power of the unbelieving nations in the land had been cut off. He was not blowing smoke in verse 14 when he said that the Lord had kept all His promises to His people.

And the same thing is true for us where it comes to our spiritual lives. Back in April, we celebrated Easter, remembering not only Jesus’ crucifixion, His death on the cross which paid the penalty for all the sins of all those who trust in Him as Savior. We also celebrated the amazing fact that He walked out of His tomb on the third day. And in our responsive reading from Romans chapter 6, Paul makes clear why Christ’s resurrection matters so much: because Jesus rose from the dead, death no longer has dominion, no longer has mastery over Him.

So, why is that so important for us? As Paul explains, those who have been baptized into Jesus, those who have become part of His body by trusting in Him as Savior, have shared not only in His death, but also in His resurrection. And that means that we are also free from the dominion, from the power of sin, just as free as the people of Western Europe were from the fascists 75 years ago in May. Just as they no longer had to fear Nazi tyranny, just as they could no longer be forced to comply with the Nazis’

vicious, racist laws, so we no longer have to give into the temptations all around us, surrendering to all our sinful desires. As Paul says in Romans 6:6, those who are in Christ are no longer slaves to sin.

But on June 28, 1945, much work still remained to be done. Europe lay in smoking ruins, and through the Marshall Plan, Americans would spend 4 more years and 12 billion dollars – almost 130 billion dollars in today's money – to help restore it. And in the Far East, battles still raged. Although Manila had been retaken from the Japanese in early March, fighting continued in the rural parts of the Philippines, on Mindanao and Luzon. And the conquest of the home islands of Japan still awaited. Operation Olympic was slated to begin in November with the invasion of Kyushu – an amphibious operation that was to be on an even greater scale than the landings in Normandy.

And the Israelite armies faced a similar situation as they listened to Joshua's speech. Yes, the power of the Canaanite resistance had been largely broken. Yes, the land had been divided up amongst the various tribes. But verse 4 makes it clear that many hostile nations still remained in the land, so a long, determined struggle would still be needed to drive them out. And as verse 11 recognizes, the Israelites would be sorely tempted to give up the struggle and just agree to live and let live, perhaps even intermarrying with their neighbors who worshipped false gods. The longer the war went on, the greater the temptation would be for the Israelites to just stop fighting.

We understand that, don't we? The whole world has been grappling with an invisible enemy since mid-March, this strange new coronavirus. To keep our hospitals from being overwhelmed, we first shut down huge portions of our economy, throwing millions of people out of work. And now, as businesses are reopening, we are tempted to forget that the war must still be waged. Even though we long to throw off our facemasks and give each other handshakes and hugs like we used to, while new cases of the disease are popping up all around us, indeed, while infection rates are actually increasing in our state, we dare not let down our guard. We have to keep denying new hosts to this virus if we ever want to defeat it, no matter how great the inconvenience to ourselves might be.

And we face the same sort of spiritual struggle against our sin, our natural tendency to turn away from God and toward ourselves. Yes, as Paul reminds us in our responsive reading from Romans 6, our old, sinful self has in fact been crucified with Christ, so that our body of sin might be done away with. But at the same time, Paul has to remind us to reckon, to consider ourselves to be what we already are – dead to sin and alive instead to God. Paul has to plead with all those who trust in Christ to be more consistent in our acknowledgment of Him as Lord of our lives, urging us not to let sin have its way in our bodies, obeying its lusts by doing what want to do instead of following God's law of self-sacrificial, unconditional love.

For that's the strangest thing about the Christian life – even though all who trust in Christ have been born again, given new life by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, we can still choose to live as though none of that is true. Although we are alive, we can play dead. Although Christ has liberated us from sin and death, we can still act like we are slaves of sin. We can stop fighting the battle even though the war is as good as won.

Now, it's easy to see how foolish it would have been for us Americans to have given up on June 28, 1945. But we could have done it. We could have looked at the terrible casualties both sides had just endured on Iwo Jima and Okinawa and we could have come to the conclusion that an invasion of Japan just wasn't worth it. With the Philippines liberated, we could have gone home – but of course that

would have left much of China, Indochina, Indonesia and Korea still in the hands of the fascist warlords. And that, in turn, would have given them both the time and the natural and human resources to rebuild their forces and strike again. There could have been no lasting peace in the Pacific under those circumstances.

In the same way, Joshua warned his people about what would happen if they made peace with the unbelievers who lived in the Promised Land: “they shall be snares and traps to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the Lord your God has given you.” In short, if the Israelites sought compromise with their enemies, they would not have gained the peace that they craved, but only inevitable defeat. They would have ended up losing everything for which they had already fought, everything which God was trying to give them.

And the same thing is true for us. No, with the coming of Christ, we are no longer called to go to war to spread our faith because the people of God are no longer confined to any particular ethnic group. Those who make up the Body of Christ are now drawn from every tribe and tongue and nation. And since all of us who trust in Christ as Savior and have bowed the knee to Him as Lord have been baptized into Christ, since we’ve been united with Him in both His death and His resurrection, we are necessarily united with every other believer, regardless of race or culture. There is thus no room within the Church of Jesus Christ for any belief in the superiority of any particular ethnic group. We must not compromise on this point.

But neither can we make any compromise with any other sin. For if the people of Joshua’s day were called to remove all the sinful unbelievers from among them, we are called to remove all the sin and unbelief from within and among ourselves. Instead of tolerating the sin in our midst and in our lives, instead of playing dead while we are actually alive, instead of acting like we are slaves to sin when we have actually been freed from its power, we are called to present ourselves to God, to give ourselves completely to His service, to devote our time, our talent, and our treasure ever more consistently to His cause.

And the good news is that God promises victory to those who persevere in such a struggle against sin. Joshua made that ever so clear in verse 5 with regard to the unbelievers still living in the land – “The Lord your God, He shall thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you shall possess their land, just as the Lord your God promised you.” And Paul made a similar promise to us New Testament believers at the very end of Romans 6: “But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Yes, God in His grace has forgiven us because of the finished work of Christ. Yes, Jesus’ victory over sin has already been accomplished, and there’s nothing we can add to it, there’s nothing we can take away from this free gift. But if we want that victory to become real in our daily lives, if we want to experience the freedom from sin that Jesus bought for us on the cross and made possible for us by walking out of His tomb, we need to live the life that He lives, a life lived only for the glory of God.

Christ has won the war, but the battle against sin still rages all around us. So, let’s stay in the fight. Let’s give ourselves to Jesus, devoting all that we are and all that we have to Him. For that’s truly the only way any of us can share in His victory.