

## Unfinished Business Joshua 13:1-7

We are certainly not strangers to changes in leadership, are we? Every single one of Port Gibson's supervisors was replaced in the last election, and only one retained his office in Warren County. Next month, Port Gibson will have yet another round of elections for Aldermen, but we already have a new Mayor and a new County Administrator. And of course we've installed a new elder and new deacons today, even as two of our long-serving elders have recently gone on to be with the Lord. And after about 65 years of Miss Betty Gage serving as our organist, we'll have Janice and Flo on the bench going forward. How well will all our new leaders do their jobs? And how will we get along without those who have left us?

The people of Israel were in a similar situation at the beginning of today's passage. Joshua had led the people of God ever since the death of Moses, and God had used Joshua in many mighty ways. Chapter 3 tells us how Joshua led the people across the Jordan River, as God held back its waters. And as we read in chapters 10 and 11, Joshua and the Israelites had conducted two great military campaigns, one in the South and one in the North, which swept through large swaths of the Promised Land, breaking the back of any resistance that lay before them. In the process, God had done mighty miracles for His people, causing the mighty walls of Jericho to collapse, showering hailstones on His enemies, and even making the sun stand still for a whole day. Yes, the days of Joshua had been great days, days of triumph and victory.

But as chapter 13 opens, those days were all in the past. Joshua was apparently too old to continue leading the people into battle. And even though the big victories had been accomplished, there was still a lot of "mopping up" to do, pockets of resistance that needed to be eliminated in all directions. Without Joshua to lead them, what hope did the people have?

Well, believe it or not, this is really the same situation in which all Christians in every generation find ourselves. Yes, it's true that Jesus has broken the power of sin and death for all His people for all time. That's the truth we celebrate every Lord's Day – because He died on the cross, all who trust in Him are freed from the power of sin and blessed with abundant life today. And because He rose from the dead, all His people are freed from the power of death, certain of our own resurrection one day and of eternal life with Him forever.

But after winning His great victory, Jesus has gone away into Heaven. And as we look at the world around us today, sin still seems to be very much in charge. God's people continue to be persecuted for their faith, especially in countries governed by Muslims or communists. Here in the United States, the rising tide of drug use and sexual immorality is pushing the Church and its understanding of right and wrong to the margins of the culture. In America's pursuit of happiness and prosperity, no one seems very interested in holiness any more.

And death seems no less dominant than sin is. Well over 60 million Americans have never had the chance to live, unborn babies offered up on the altar of sexual freedom. And how many funerals have we attended lately? For all this talk about Christians being victorious over sin and death, it sure doesn't feel very much like we're winning.

Yes, we really do find ourselves in the same situation which the Israelites faced in today's passage – even after tremendous victories, we have a lot of unfinished business left to do. Oh, Christ may have broken the back of sin and death. By virtue of His cross and His empty tomb, Christ may already have all authority in Heaven and on Earth. But in the world where we live every day, we still have to struggle against sin and death everywhere we look, all the time.

So, how did Joshua prepare his people for life without him? How did he equip them to do battle against the remnants of their essentially defeated foes? Well, in verse 7, God told him to divide the land among the various tribes of Israel. And the particulars of which territory each tribe was to possess makes up much of the rest of the book.

Just so, if we are to get busy about the work Jesus has left for us to do, if we are to fight against the powers of sin and death within ourselves and in the wider world around us, we'll have to do the same sort of thing – we'll have to divide up the work, which is much more than any one person or congregation can possibly handle. I mean, what can we few believers possibly do about the nationwide scourges of abortion and opioid addiction? What can the 600 congregations of the EPC do?

Well, one Israelite family or tribe couldn't conquer all of the Promised Land either. But if they divided up the work, if each small group did what they could in their local area, together they could make a big impact.

And this division of labor is essential where it comes to the problem of sin. For each of us must carry on this struggle first within ourselves, resisting the temptations of the world, and putting to death the desires of the flesh. As Paul told us in our responsive reading, each of us must put on the armor God has supplied for us. We must wrap the truth of God tightly around ourselves, so we won't be deceived by the lies of Satan. We must clothe ourselves in the righteousness of Christ, so we might have confidence to live in the same selfless, loving way He does. We must hold tight to the shield of faith, so that we might trust in God no matter how difficult the circumstances of our lives may become. We must put on the helmet of salvation, always remembering the great sacrifice that Christ has made for us. And we have to prepare ourselves this way, we have to remind ourselves of the gospel every day, so that we might then carry this good news to others, showing and sharing the love of Christ with everyone we meet. That's how we conduct our daily battle against the remnants of sin.

And there's a very real sense in which each one of us has a completely different battlefield on which to labor. We not only have different struggles with besetting sin. We also belong to different families, we work among different people, and we have different circles of friends. This means we'll all be aware of different needs that we can meet each day, different people who need to know Christ or who need to know Him better.

Yes, just as Joshua divided up the work among the different tribes of Israel, Jesus has set each of us on a different part of the battlefield in the fight against sin. But He has also made us part of a great, worldwide army. And that means we are called to cooperate with one another within our congregation, but also with other congregations in our community, or in our presbytery, or even around the world.

But that doesn't mean we're all called to do exactly the same thing. For just as Joshua divided up the Promised Land for different tribes to subdue, God has given different responsibilities to different parts of His Church. To the pastors and teachers He has given the responsibility for explaining God's

Word and exhorting us to more consistent Christian living. To the ruling elders, He has given the task of holding all of us accountable for our profession of faith. To the deacons, He has given the responsibility of encouraging God's people to participate in the work of the Kingdom, as well as coordinating all those gifts of time, talent, and treasure so they might be put to the best use.

And different congregations are called to serve God in different ways. Some are large and wealthy enough to give birth to daughter congregations, providing most of the funds and members needed to start a new worshipping community – Cornerstone Church in Katy is helping in this way to plant Haven church nearby. Others are called to partner with other nearby congregations to bring the gospel to a new area – a network of coastal churches is helping in this way to get the Church of the Resurrection in New Orleans off the ground. Still others are called to contribute our funds and prayers to new church plants at home and abroad. We are supporting Quest Church and Haven Church in this way, as well as our Engage 2025 project overseas.

But if none of us can possibly do all the work of the Kingdom by ourselves, and if all of us are called to participate in that God's Kingdom work in different places and in different ways, we can all engage in this great work with the greatest of confidence. For even though our leaders may come and go, our success is not dependent on any one pastor or teacher, any one deacon or ruling elder. Yes, Joshua was passing from the scene. No, Joshua would not be able to lead the people in battle anymore. But in spite of this, God made a promise to His people in verse 6 – “them will I drive out from before the children of Israel.” You see, it was God, not Joshua, who gave His people the ultimate victory.

And the same thing is true for us today. Yes, sometimes it seems as though Jesus has left us to continue His work all on our own. But in reality, He continues to rule and reign over every part of the battlefield on which we fight. Because of His death, resurrection and ascension into Heaven, all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Him. He has already won the victory, and He has given us all the tools we need – His Word and the power of His Holy Spirit within us – to mop up the remaining resistance all around us. So as we take up the challenge He has given to us, as we do our part of His great work of prayer and love and service and evangelism and mission, we can be sure that He will bless our efforts.

So, let us rise up, men and women of God! Let's follow our leaders into battle against sin wherever we may find it. Wherever we go this week, let's do our part to demonstrate the love and truth and justice of Christ, declaring His victory and offering His welcome and pardon for all who would surrender to Him.