

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Refuge, Return, & Renewal – (Joshua Chapters 20 – 24) Last week we explored the reluctance among the people of God to possess the land of promise as well as the difference between inheriting the land and possessing the land. This week we will again turn to this very important distinction, but not before we explore a few other events that transpired in the latter days of Joshua's life. Today, we will look at the designation of the cities of refuge, that took place during the apportioning of the land, the return of the 2.5 tribes to the other side of the Jordan, and the final challenge given to the people from the lips of Joshua and their subsequent renewal of the covenant.

Part One: Refuge in the Land of Promise – The land of promise was itself a refuge from the idolatrous lifestyle and dominion of the gentile world during OT times. However, Moses was quite explicit that they should lay aside cities of refuge once they inhabited the land of promise so that one who has mistakenly taken the life of another might have a place of recourse from the avenger of blood. This is a very interesting concept to which we will now direct our attention. In Numbers 35:9-15 we read, *“And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, when you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge. These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.”* We here see the command to set aside a total of six cities to be used for refuge. The only residents of the city (apart from the priests) were to be people fleeing from the avenger of blood. In the ancient near east (and even today among many nomadic Arabs), the avenger of blood was the designated member of a family or tribe responsible for slaying the person who killed a member of the family or tribe. The Mosaic law makes the provision for a city of refuge only if the killer has been tried and is found guilty of manslaughter, but not murder. He or she had to reside in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest, and could then return to the land of his possession without being at risk.

One point should be made before we move on regarding the relationship between the guilt party and the death of the high priest. If the individual guilty of involuntary manslaughter is somehow free to leave the city of refuge after the high priest's death and return to the land of his inheritance without fear of being slain, what role did the high priest play in this matter? As we have seen before, all death (even accidental death) is a result of the fall. Consequently, the death of anyone living within the covenant community had to be atoned for, because blood polluted the land (Numbers 35:33). This atonement was borne by the death of the slayer in the event of murder, but not so in the event of one guilty of involuntary manslaughter. In a sense the high priest, who personally represented God to the people and the people to God played a mediatorial role in the life of the people of God. This is referenced in Hebrews 10:11 when the comparison between the inferior high priest under the Mosaic covenant was Baney, Lesson 7 Winter/Spring 2016

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contrasted with the superior High Priest under the New Covenant, i.e. Christ himself. There is a sense in which the high priest even under the Mosaic covenant bore the sins of the people of God on himself when he went into the holy of holies to perform his priestly duties. Doing so had no salvific ramifications, but was sacramental in that it foreshadowed the perfect sacrifice of Christ who would effectively bear the sins of his people once for all in his substitutionary death and atonement.

Three of the six cities of refuge were determined by Moses (Deuteronomy 4:41-43), and the remaining three were allotted by Joshua when he apportioned the land to the people of God. It is worth noting that all six of the cities of refuge were given as places of residence to the Levites. So, there is a connectedness between the mediatorial role played by the sons of Levi and the guilty party (see Joshua 21). In a sense fleeing to a city of refuge was akin to finding safety and security in the anointing of the high priest, an anointing that radiated down to all the priestly clans by virtue of their relationship to the temple of God.

By way of pastoral application, Christ is of his own admittance, the true temple (John 2:19). The Psalmist stated, *"In the Lord I take refuge; how can you say to my soul, 'Flee like a bird to your mountain...'"* (Psalms 11:1). Likewise, in Hebrews 6:8 we read, *"...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."* This language is used to give us every indication that Christ is our "city of refuge". To him we can flee, and he will secure us safely from the avenger of blood for he shed his life's blood for us.

Part Two: Return – After the conclusion of the apportionment of the land and the designation of the cities of refuge, Joshua called to himself the tribes of Gad, Reuben and half the tribe of Manasseh and dismissed them from their military obligation to God and their brethren. He then sent them back to the land assigned to them by Moses before his death.

When the two and one half tribes cross the Jordan, they do something that quickly gains the attention of the rest of Israel, they build an altar. God had been very specific to Moses and to his people, that they were not to build an altar haphazardly to the worship of God (Deuteronomy 12:5), but should only build an altar in the place of his tabernacle (later temple). This quickly evoked the response from Israel that one would find welcoming and refreshing in days to come. Scripture gives the account that, *"...the whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shiloh to make way against them."* When Gad, Reuben, and half of Manasseh were confronted by an emissary of the army of Israel about the altar, we read a notable response: *"...If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the Lord, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following the Lord. No, but we did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, 'What have you to do with the Lord the God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben, and people of Gad. You have no portion in the Lord'"* (22:22b-27).

So, the real reason the people of Gad, Reuben, and half of Manasseh erected the altar was for remembrance. Now, whether or not this happened after the death of Joshua or while Joshua was yet alive we do not know for certain. If the book of Joshua is consistently chronological, then these events would have happened prior to his death. However, his leadership is strikingly absent during this event, a surprise given his position if he were alive. Those living on the other side of the Jordan should not have been surprised by the altar of remembrance, since Joshua commanded the people to erect the same when they crossed the Jordan. For the descendants of the people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, the altar was insurance against an allegation that never materialized.

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Part Three: Renewal – Towards the end of his life (probably right after the allotment of the remainder of the land given the similarity between the language in the beginning of chapter twenty-three and that used in the beginning of chapter thirteen), Joshua calls all Israel back to the God of the Covenant. This is after the miraculous crossing of the Jordan, after the supernatural deliverance of the inhabitants of the land of promise into the hands of God's people, and after the allotment of the land. The entire generation of conquest had renewed the covenant between God and themselves through a massive circumcision at Gilgal. Now several years later, they were being called by the aged leader back to the covenant.

After reminding the people of the mighty deeds performed by God on their behalf, he gives them a charge to do three things: 1) Bew strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses (23:6). Here we see one of the distinctive characteristics of the leadership of Joshua compared to that of Moses. Moses gave instruction for the people of God to obey the commandments and statutes of God (11:1). Joshua, gave the same commandment by assigning a central role to the written word of God.

Secondly, Israel was commanded not to make marriages with the people still dwelling in the land, *"...so that you associate with them and they with you..."* This association would result in, *"The Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you"* (23:13). The continued supernatural expulsion of the inhabitants of the land before the people of God was contingent upon their continued obedience, particularly as it relates to associating with the inhabitants of the land. This, unfortunately, becomes the truth that defines the period of the Judges, and makes the kingship among God's people a desired characteristic.

God reminds his people that he is giving to them, *"...a land on which you have not labored and cities that you have not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant"* (24:13). Grace leaks through these pages like a river through a sponge. Nothing that Israel has been given can be attributed to their just wages. All is the result of God's grace, his unmerited favor covenantally conferred to the descendants of the patriarchs for the sake of his own glory.

Finally, Israel is challenged to choose whom they will serve, because they cannot serve both the covenant keeping God and the idols of the inhabitants of the land. It is here that Joshua makes his famous speech, *"...chose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"* (24:15). The people answer that they will not serve the gods of their forefathers (Terah) who lived on the other side of God's covenantal promises, nor will they serve the gods of the Amorites who live outside of God's covenantal promises, but they will serve the Lord. To this, Joshua tells them they cannot, because, *"...he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good"* (24:19-20). To this the people of Israel reply, *"No, but we will serve the Lord"* (24:21). He then continues to inform them that by renewing the covenant before God as a people, they have become an altar of memorial unto themselves, a witness of their covenant renewal. The text concludes, *"So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God..."* (24:25-26a).

Conclusion: The book of Joshua is a fascinating book that bridges the Pentateuch with the rest of scripture. If the Pentateuch tells of the creation of the world, the fall of man, and the righteous law of

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God who is covenantally seeking to redeem all things, the book of Joshua tells us how this covenant keeping God remains faithful to his covenant. As such it is the perfect transitional statement to the period of the Judges when, “*every man did what was right in his own eyes*” and the period of the kings when, “*the king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord*” (Proverbs 21:1). We witness the primacy of the Word of God as the source of authority in the life of ancient Israel. We see the reason that complete conquest did not occur, and why the reign of King David was initiated in the context of defeating the Philistine armies. Indeed, the book of Joshua is the critical link between all that comes before and all that comes after.

Questions:

- 1) *In what ways has God demonstrated his covenantal faithfulness to the church of the twenty-first century?*
- 2) *How might God’s covenantal faithfulness look differently today than in the time of Joshua?*
- 3) *Why was covenant renewal so often necessary for the OT church?*
- 4) *Why do you think God would cease to expel the inhabitants from the land if Israel associated with them and intermarried with them?*
- 5) *In what ways does God’s command about not associating with the Canaanite inhabitants inform how the church should interact with the culture/societies in which we live?*
- 6) *How might the answer to the preceding question (# 5) be misapplied?*