

Co-Existing with Canaanites

By David de Bruyn

Reading in the book of Judges is perhaps one of the saddest experiences one can have after reading the book of Joshua. Joshua is all about victory, fulfilled promises and the blessings of obedience. Judges is all about defeat, missed blessings and the consequences of sin. The book of Judges is an exact fulfilment of what God promised would come upon Israel for turning away from him. And if you have been running high on the momentum of seeing Joshua defeat city after city, enemy after enemy – nothing is as sad as to see God's people fall back in the book of Judges. In fact, one could really nail down their problem to one simple thing: a failure to drive out all the nations of Canaanites in the land.

After numerous victories we read in Joshua 13:1: "Now Joshua was old and advanced in years, and the LORD said to him,

"You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess." (Jos 13:1)

He then goes on to list all the areas that remain under Canaanite control. But he gives him this promise in verse 6:

"I myself will drive them out from before the people of Israel. Only allot the land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have commanded you."

God promised Joshua that if Israel continued to obey His command to battle the pagans in Canaan, He would do the actual driving out. Given the kind of enormous victories the children of Israel had experienced, it is almost a foregone conclusion that they would simply finish the job. After all, why would they not complete the task of taking over all the land that God had promised to them? Well, sadly, we read in Joshua 17:13:

Joshua 17:13: "Now when the people of Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not utterly drive them out." (Jos 17:13)

The next chapter begins this way:

"Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, 'I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.'"
(Jdg 2:1-3)

Now the Promised Land has been the subject of many analogies in Christian teaching. Some have compared Canaan with heaven. Some hymns sing of heaven as the Promised Land or as Canaan. One very popular false teaching compares the Promised Land with a supposed life of health and wealth for the Christian. All the promises of

physical blessing of the land of Canaan are then wrongly said to be promises of physical prosperity for the New Testament Christian. Inconsistently, such heresies never include all the promised curses God said would happen to Israel if they disobeyed – it all just seems to be about blessing. Well, the story of Israel entering into the Promised Land is not a picture of physical health and wealth. It is also not a picture of heaven, since we will not be fighting wars in heaven. It is a picture of the victorious, abundant Christian life. The wilderness that Israel was in pictures a dry, unfulfilling Christian life, and the promised land pictures a Christian life rich in fellowship with God, with His power, with His presence, with His purposes guiding, directing and helping us.

Likewise, the enemies of Israel picture the enemies of a Christian's spiritual life: sin and unbelief. From Israel's sad example, we can see direct parallels for why many Christians never experience an abundant, full Christian life.

Many Christians never come to maturity because they draw back in unbelief. The whole reason why an entire generation of Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness was because, when offered the land, they drew back. The spies returned with a report of the land. Two of them said with excitement: "Grapes, you won't believe the size of the grapes! Let's go up and take possession of it!"

The other 10 said, "Grasshoppers! We're like grasshoppers compared to the giants of this land! We cannot take these walled and fortified cities. Let's turn back." Because of their unbelief, Israel was denied entering the land till all those over 20 years had died. The writer of Hebrews draws on this very incident to encourage his readers not to draw back in fear and unbelief.

"Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul." (Heb 10:38-39)

God will always seek to draw His children into a deeper walk with Him by means of giving the situations which require faith. But those situations are normally the ones which seem impossible to human eyes – which do not make sense according to human reasoning. To stand up for righteousness in a way which could jeopardise a promotion; to witness to someone who could harm you for doing so; to go into ministry when the finances do not add up – all these are steps of faith, where God must make up the shortfall as it were, where we must rely on God and not human resources.

When you go forward, it is a step of faith which glorifies God, since there is nothing else you are finally hanging on to. However, when you draw back, when you shrink back from what God wants you to do, it essentially dismisses God from the picture. You act in a way which suggests God is not there. When believers shrink back in unbelief, they can never experience the blessings of the mature Christian life. Every time God wishes to grow them, to make them a little stronger, they shrink back to what they know and are comfortable with. This attitude, repeated over a lifetime produces essentially, a wilderness experience for a Christian. Like those Israelites, God is providing for and protecting that believer, but life is barren, empty and dry.

Sadly, many believers get used to the wilderness life. They begin to expect nothing more, and so choose to remain in their state of lukewarmness. They settle into a pattern of walking around in circles, spiritually speaking. And every time God confronts them with an opportunity to go forward into a more satisfying Christian life, they shrink back to what they know, to what they can measure, to what they can do and control in their own human strength and understanding.

However, the Israelites who entered the Promised Land committed another sin: They chose to compromise with their spiritual enemies. God had told Israel to drive the Canaanites out completely. His reason was that he did not want Israel to begin to copy their evil and pagan practices. Now, after a number of wars, Israel begins to settle in the land. A sad thing begins to happen. As Israel now has enough land to live and farm on, they begin to reason, “Why fight more wars?” Those Canaanites are not bothering us. They’re allowing us to live here. Why shouldn’t we let them live there? Let’s just live and let live.” And so Israel did not finish the job. As we open the book of Judges, we read the following:

“When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely. And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them. Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol, so the Canaanites lived among them, but became subject to forced labor. (Jdg 1:28-30).

The following verse repeats the same idea with many of the other tribes – refusing to drive the Canaanites out.

Notice the two forms of compromise. Some Canaanites they left alone completely. In other words, they allowed them to live, multiply and strengthen right on their doorstep. Others, they subordinated. They did ‘conquer’ them, so to speak, but not in the way God told them to. He told Israel to completely destroy the towns. Some towns were to be offered peace, but only the woman and children were to be subordinated, everyone else was to be put to death. It seems harsh, but God was using Israel to judge the evil and abominable ways of the Canaanites. So wicked were these people that God told Israel it was because of their sin and not Israel’s righteousness that He was driving them out and putting Israel in. And when surrounded by sin of this nature, God wanted Israel to be absolutely ruthless. Their holy ways were to invade and then pervade the nation. The sin and idolatry and perversions of the Canaanites were to be cast out completely. But Israel totally ignored some Canaanites, and gently subordinated others.

What was behind this attitude? Firstly, they were choosing comfort over obedience. Once you had settled into your own little home, why grab your sword and chase Canaanites miles away. It seemed very much like the mentality today – I’ve got mine, I’m comfortable, why must I be worried about others.

Secondly, they chose consolidation over conquering. It seemed easier to simply consolidate the victories they already had, instead of seeking out new ones. After all, you can hear the pragmatic Israelite saying – ‘we don’t want to overstretch ourselves. We’re thinned out already. Let’s just fortify what we have’.

Now what is the parallel for the Christian? Well, if the land is a picture of the mature, abundant Christian life, then the Canaanites are certainly pictures of sin. And when God's people choose to co-exist with their sin instead of eradicating it, they will bear sad consequences. Interestingly, New Testament believers do exactly the same thing regarding sin as the Israelites did with the Canaanites. Some sins, we tolerate completely. We reason, "It's not a problem. It's always been here. I've always done this and it hasn't harmed me." So, they allow a sin to live inside them without any effort to purge it out. No challenge is given to the sin nature; it is instead given full permission to lodge within our souls. It can be an attitude, a thought, and a way of speaking, a heart of bitterness or unforgiveness. It can be an evil tongue, a tendency to gossip, or to lust, or to covet, or to be arrogant and conceited. It can be materialism, or worldliness or any number of words, thoughts and deeds that are contrary to the nature of God.

The other strategy that some Christians adopt is to try and subordinate a sin, like the Israelites did with the Canaanites. They do not want the pain and discipline of killing a sin, so they settle to try and have that sin, only on a smaller level. So you will hear them saying things like, "Well, I know it's wrong, but I've got it under control." Or "Well, I know it can be wrong, but I don't abuse it, I just do it in moderation". This is the kind of Christian who thinks that their sin is somehow under control, like a pet tied to a tree. They think they can use that sin when they feel like it, but they assure themselves that 'they can stop anytime' or 'it's not dangerous for me because I am in full control of the situation'.

Well, let's go back to judges and find out what the result was of this strategy of compromising with your spiritual enemies:

*"And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.
(Jdg 2:10-14)*

How interesting. Israel thought that by tolerating their enemies and subordinating them, they were actually doing themselves a favour. But the opposite was true. Instead what happened was the following:

Firstly, spiritual lukewarmness led to spiritual ignorance, the kind of climate which was tolerating the surrounding Canaanites could not have been exactly zealous for God's name. Now, what kind of parents do you think these people were going to be? The kind that did family devotions every day? The kind that recounted the stories of deliverance from Egypt and the conquering of Canaan. No – their lukewarmness led to a slothful and totally indifferent attitude toward instructing their children spiritually. And that can be the only explanation for the verse:

“And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.”

They simply did not teach their children who God was. Many Christian parents today are so lukewarm in their own walk with the Lord, that they do not teach their children anything spiritually. As such, their philosophy is, “We must let them decide for themselves. We must not force Christianity on them.” Sadly, they do not even seem to give them the option of Christianity since they do not teach them at all. And so they perpetuate spiritual ignorance.

Secondly, spiritual ignorance led to spiritual apostasy. A vacuum must be filled. This generation rose up very religious. And so what did they fill the gap with? Worshipping Baal and other false gods. In the same way, when we tolerate sin and compromise in our families and churches, people will turn to that sin, to that worldliness, to that false teaching to fill the gap that we are not filling by diligently teaching the Word. By leaving the Canaanites in the land, those parents ensured that the option of worshipping Baal was there. When we tolerate sin, worldliness and false teaching, we ensure that those things are around for our family and others to turn to. Spiritual ignorance leads to spiritual apostasy. Many parents lament the fact that their children are now far from God. But close inspection will reveal there was neither a diligent teaching in the home of God, nor were the sinful influences and compromised elements removed.

Thirdly, spiritual apostasy led to spiritual depravity and spiritual bondage. Once into their false religions, we are told that...” God gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.” From having subordinated the Canaanites, they became the subordinates.

What a tragedy - from being the conquering soldiers of Yahweh to being enslaved to Baal worshippers. Where did it begin? With a soft, slothful attitude toward sin. That is the nature of sin. We think we have it under control. We think it can peacefully co-exist with us. But sin always takes over, if left to itself. Sin was not meant to be subordinated, it was meant to be eradicated. When we allow sinful influences in our home, they do not simply co-exist with our godly morals, they take over. When we allow sins into our lives without dealing with them, they do not merely co-exist, they eventually take over and control. Jesus himself said in John 8:34:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

I believe the same sad situation that Israel underwent is being played out day after day in the lives of countless Christians. Instead of pressing forward, they shrink back. Instead of going to war against sin in their lives, they settle in to consolidate who they are right now. They try to control some sins, and they let others be. Spiritual lukewarmness and dryness sets in. Soon, spiritual dullness and ignorance takes over. If they are not careful, bondage and depravity await them as the sins they have tolerated take over. This same scene happens on a larger scale in families and in churches where Biblical teaching is forsaken for a slothful, TV- watching comfort zone. Ignorance multiplies and the spiritually thirsty hearts go drinking in the pools of

sin, the world and false religion. This leads to wasted lives in bondage to sin and ruined by it.

What is the alternative? The alternative is to do what God said. He instructed the Israelites to battle the Canaanites, and He would drive them out. Likewise, God instructs the New Testament Christian to battle sin in His life, and God will drive it out. How do we battle sin in our lives? By binding and rebuking spirits? By repeating the same prayer over and over again? No, by putting sin to death. Jesus spoke of the viciousness with which we must seek to eradicate sin in our lives. He said in Matthew:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Mat 5:29-30)

Now, how do we put sin to death in this vicious way? Firstly, we must identify sin as sin. The Israelites had been told very clearly by God who remained as enemies to Israel. In the same way, God has made it very clear in His Word what sin is. He has sometimes given us lists of sins. He has given us principles to decide if something is sinful but not spelt out in the Word. So, if we are serious about eradicating sin, it means we must take the time too examine ourselves. We must say like David:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psa 139:23-24)

We must look for the sins in our lives; use the Word as a mirror to examine ourselves and have the accountability of a local church to see the sins in our lives. This will be an ongoing process throughout our lives. God will never show us all our sin at one time, or it will discourage us. But He will show things to the one who wants to change.

Secondly, we must give sin no food to live on. You could think of this as a scorched earth policy. If the enemy has nothing to live on, it will die or be defeated. Romans 6:13 tells us:

“Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness”

Do not give your eyes, ears, thoughts things for sin to feed on. Do not expose yourself to sinfully tempting images, sounds, conversations, pictures, images, literature – anything that will provide fuel for sin later on. If you do not feed something, it dies. We must eradicate all influences that are anti-God in their theme, and do not edify or help us spiritually.

Thirdly, we must give sin no opportunity to tempt us.

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Rom 13:14)

If we are serious about eradicating sin, we must eliminate the possible sources of temptation, and even avoid the circumstances in which we are most likely to be tempted. This is not isolation, this is wisdom. Part of the Lord's Prayer is, 'Lead us not into temptation'. We are to avoid questionable situations and circumstances that will make it easy to sin.

Fourthly we must not give sin a chance to grab us. If we have done our best to avoid temptation, and still find ourselves in temptation, we are to flee. Now this might sound like the opposite of waging war, but it is part of the strategy. God has already won the war against sin on the cross. Now, fleeing temptation is part of killing sin in our lives. We are not told to stand and fight temptation, we are to flee. Joseph provides a clear example of this when he literally fled from the seduction of Potiphar's wife. More Christians would have more consistent obedience if they did not linger when temptation came; if they did not toy with the idea of sinning. The New Testament is filled with 'flee sexual immorality' 'flee youthful lusts', 'flee idolatry'. This is the form a Christian's 'no' is to take - a fleeing from the temptation. Remember it can also be fleeing in your mind from that thought, fleeing with your eyes from that image, or actually fleeing with your feet from the situation. This is what Paul refers to in Colossians 3:5 when he says:

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:"

We kill a sinful desire by refusing to feed it, and by refusing to indulge it.

Fifthly we must follow after righteousness. We flee from something, and then we follow after something. We put off the old, we put on the new.

"But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." (1Ti 6:11)

There is a fleeing, but then there is a following. We must replace the sin we are battling with a corresponding act of righteousness. It is not enough to subtract sin, we must add Christlikeness. The Israelites were not only to eradicate the Canaanites; they were to move in and to begin worshipping God. They failed on both accounts.

So, if we are to truly enter the Christlike, mature Christian life, we must face the battle with sin with zeal, opposite to that of the Israelites' slothfulness. We must identify sin, give it nothing to feed on, give it no opportunities to tempt us, flee from temptation, and follow after righteousness. All this is made possible because of Christ's death and resurrection. May we fight, not for victory – but from victory. From the victory of the cross and resurrection, may we wholeheartedly battle with sin, so as to enter into that abundant life of spiritual maturity.
