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**Joshua 23:1–13 ESV, abridged**

*23 A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, <sup>2</sup>Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, “I am now old and well advanced in years. <sup>3</sup>And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for you. <sup>5</sup>The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you. <sup>6</sup>Therefore, be very strong and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, <sup>7</sup>that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods. <sup>11</sup>Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God. <sup>12</sup>For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, <sup>13</sup>know for certain that 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.*

### **Survivors.**

When I was in ninth grade, a buddy of mine had a mother who was always described as being “very sick”. I didn’t know it until many years later, but her sickness was depression. This was during a time when people were ashamed of suffering from depression; it was thought to be a weakness and it wasn’t recognized as a biologically and genetically rooted disease as we know to be the case today. I thought that his mother must be slowly dying, and I guessed it to be cancer. My friend came to school one day with a copy of the Bible and I asked

him why he was carrying it around. He said that he was practicing some of the more complex words in a passage that he was about to read to his mother. He explained that his mother had asked him to read the entire Bible to her, and he was doing it bit by bit, reading a few pages a day. I was very impressed. Then he started talking about the part he had been reading to her recently. It was from the books of Numbers and Joshua and had to do with the invasion of Canaan and the slaughter of the Canaanites. My friend was blown away by how brutal it was. Here's a passage from Deuteronomy 20: *But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, <sup>17</sup> but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, <sup>18</sup> that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.*

We all know that this part of the Old Testament has been used by non-believers as evidence that Judaism and Christianity are brutal faiths, and that the people who practice these faiths are bigots who believe they are superior, and all others are inferior. It is indeed true that God's order for the Israelites to invade Canaan and destroy the inhabitants was used as an excuse for American colonists

to murder native Americans. The general idea in the Bible was that Canaan was destined by God to become Israel, the promised land, and so the inhabitants, since they were pagans, had to be destroyed. This was to prevent the Israelites from intermarrying with them. They also had to make sure that the pagans would never cause the Israelites to water down their faith in God. My friend said that he didn't like reading such violent stuff to his mother who was very sad because she was so sick. He said that he had thought the Bible would lift her up, but while he was reading this material to her, he told me, she just sat there looking very thoughtful. I told him that I hadn't ever read it myself, but that I would do so. He said that he was going to read the end of the invasion stuff to his mother that evening, and that he would tell me the next day what she thought of it. I went home and skimmed this material to get the general idea. I'll get back to this.

We've talked about the invasion of Canaan before. First of all, if you read the story of the invasion in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges, it's clear that it was not a one-sided war and that the Canaanites were not defenseless. Here, from the Book of Joshua, is a highly compressed version of what happened when the Canaanites heard that the Israelites were attacking: *When the enemy of the Israelites, heard of this, he sent messengers to the many kings of the surrounding empires.* <sup>4</sup> *And all of them came out with all their troops, a great horde, in number*

*like the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots.* <sup>5</sup>And all these kings joined their forces and came to fight against Israel. But I am not here to defend the Israelite's eventual massacre of the Canaanites. What's true is that there is strong evidence that the Canaanites survived and that their descendants are alive and well today, largely in Lebanon, just north of Israel. Scientists have carefully analyzed the DNA of people from Christian, Druze, and Muslim sects in Lebanon. They have compared this DNA to DNA found in gravesites dating to 1700 B.C., that is 3,700 years ago, in the Biblical city of Sidon, where ancient Canaanites lived. There was a 90% correlation, strongly suggesting that the people who live in Lebanon today are descendants of the Canaanites. Further, there is absolutely zero archeological evidence that would suggest that there was widespread destruction of Canaanite cities between the Bronze and Iron Ages. So, if the Israelites destroyed the Canaanites, they did it without doing much damage at all, as the Bible describes. In sum, there is evidence that the story of the invasion of Canaan and the slaughter of the Canaanites is a myth.

Or is it? I believe that it is a faith story. Remember that the Israelites didn't believe in Heaven as we know it. Their covenant with God granted them three things, all payable now on Earth: 1, God's blessing, 2, Progeny or offspring, and 3, Land to live on. They didn't see themselves as living forever personally; they lived

through their descendants, and so number 2, having descendants, was very important. As for number 3, Land, also remember that these were wanderers without land, people who had been enslaved and found themselves on the run. The story of the invasion of Canaan is a dramatic tale meant to visualize the fulfillment of God's promise. It was there to reassure Israelites and later Jews – and then later, us – that God does not abandon God's people. God keeps God's promises with us. There are those who believe that the entire Exodus story is a similar faith story, and that it is not literally true. Perhaps a modest number of people, not the two million described in the Bible, made their way out of captivity in Egypt to Canaan and then later, a new ethnic group, the Israelites, emerged out of the Canaanite population. The people who made it there from Egypt would have planted the idea of a group of escaped slaves making it to Canaan, and later, this new ethnic group used this story in their faith story. So, the original monotheist people who believed in a single, true God and called themselves Israelites might have largely been descendants of the Canaanites. Then, after many centuries had gone by, this story evolved into the full-blown Exodus story and the story of the invasion and destruction of Canaan. Or maybe the Israelites were indeed a wholly different people, but they lived side by side with the Canaanites and never actually used violence to gain land.

Here is what is important. This does NOT make the story not true. It would mean that this is a story about God's dependability, so that future generations would know that they can trust God. God did indeed provide for the Chosen People. The Jews survived and our faith emerged from their faith. This story as it's told in the Bible could be essentially an allegory, something that while it is not literal in the modern sense, is very much literal in the ancient faith story sense. We do need to remember that the writers of the Bible did not have the same sense of fact vs. fiction that we have today. They had a broader sense of what was true. And a powerful faith story is the truest thing of all.

I want to get back to my friend who was reading the Bible to his mother who was suffering from a deep depression and whom I thought was dying of cancer. The next day at school, after my friend had read the end of the Canaanite invasion story to her, he told me that he had asked his mother what she thought of it. We were in a hallway between class, at our lockers. He said that his mother had looked deeply thoughtful through the whole story, and then when he asked her to give her opinion of it, she broke out in a big smile. She had him read part of it over. I will admit that I am not at all certain that I have found the right part, but I think that it is the passage we are looking at today, or this passage is at least indicative of what she pointed out to her son. Here it is, abridged even more than

the version you heard before this sermon: **23** *A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years,* <sup>2</sup> *Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, "I am now old.* <sup>3</sup> *You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations.*<sup>5</sup> *The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you.* <sup>6</sup> *Therefore, turn aside from the Law neither to the right hand nor to the left; do not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods.* <sup>11</sup> *Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God.* <sup>12</sup> *For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them,* <sup>13</sup> *know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive them before you, but they shall be a snare for you, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you.* My friend's mother said that it was clear that there were many survivors among the Canaanites. She said that she wasn't really sure how many of them were killed, but obviously, this passage says that the nations of the Canaanites were still alive, just pushed aside somehow, and that God was holding them at bay so that the Israelites would not adopt their ways. The Israelites had to separate themselves spiritually, they were not to be infected

with the beliefs of the Canaanites. The Israelites would be mixing among these people physically and it was important that they not mix with them spiritually. The Israelites would have to fight hard to keep their faith pure. My friend's mother was lifted up by the gruesome story of the slaughter of the Canaanites. She said that God planted the Israelites among the Canaanite survivors and let them be an example of just what it means to follow the one God who created the world. She told her son to be careful, that there would be Canaanites all around him throughout his life. She made him promise that he would never fall to the temptations of this world and that he would always live in God's world. Now, what a theory, huh? My friend's mother saw this supposed invasion and slaughter as an evangelical effort and as solid spiritual advice for her son.

Just after I finished college, I happened to see my friend from high school again. I hadn't seen him in four years. It was then that he told me that his mother had really been suffering from depression. I reminded him about the time that he had read the Bible to his mother and I asked him how much of it he actually managed to read to her. He said that he didn't make it any further than the story of the invasion of Canaan, that after this, she had him read her something else. I reminded him that his mother had apparently found the story

uplifting. He told me that yes, she had, and that his mother was like that, that she was always trying to find a way to turn something dark into something bright.

So, there you have it. Remember that God does not want us to use the Bible as a stamp of approval for our own greed. God wants us to see God's faithfulness, grace, and love in Scripture. We are to use it to lift ourselves up and to lift others up. When the Bible seems to conflict with this, it is because we are reading it too narrowly, interpreting it in the context of today's standards for writing histories. It is an ancient faith text. We must see it this way – always. Please pray with me.

*God, let us be like my friend's mother. Let us see ourselves not as believers cast within the midst of nonbelievers who see us as the enemy. Let us see ourselves as believers who were deliberately put in the middle of a people who to a large degree have lost their faith in you. May we keep their values at bay while we work to remind them of the faith of their ancestors. May we be the new Israelites who, rather than being here as brutal colonists, are here to keep your presence alive in this land. May we see this as a privilege and a joy. Guide us always to treat our neighbors, the Canaanites among us, as good people, as children of God, equal to us in God's eyes. May we be gracious and forgiving, and may we, through our example, show the people around us the path to you. Let us show them that being a child of God is the most joyous way to live. Amen.*