

## Joshua 17:14-18

### Realizing Our Potential

*...Thou art a great people, and hast great power – v. 17*

There are many in our country today that refer to the World War II generation as the greatest generation in American history. It's not hard to see why such a title would be assigned to that generation. The sacrifices that were made in order to answer the call to serve one's country were greater sacrifices than succeeding generations are able to fathom.

Whenever I think of the greatest generation in Bible times my mind is drawn to that generation that lived in the days of Joshua. Here is a generation of Israelites that succeeded where their parents had failed. Their parents didn't have the faith or the courage that springs from faith to enter the promised land. That generation instead spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. That generation would have to be marked as the generation that succeeded in provoking the Lord until his longsuffering had expired and he dealt with them by rewarding them for their unbelief. And thus they wandered in the wilderness all their complaining lives until at last they passed from the scene of time.

What a contrast between them and their children. The book of Joshua records the conquests by those under Joshua's leadership. Here is the generation that crossed Jordan, that saw the walls of Jericho fall, that saw the sun stand still in its place until the enemies of Israel were defeated. Here is the generation that could withstand and defeat a number of alliances by other kings gathered against them.

And following these conquests we have the account of the land being divided among the tribes of Israel. So they were a great generation perhaps the greatest generation in Old Testament history. Having said this about them, I must, nevertheless concede that they were far from perfect. Beginning in 15:63 we begin to read accounts of the Israelites conquests being stalled. *As for the Jebusites the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the children of Judah could not drive them out: but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem unto this day.*

The book of Judges begins with the theme of what that generation of Israelites failed to do – {**cf. Judges 1 (marked verses)**}. When you look at these verses, all of a sudden, the greatness of the greatest generation seems a bit tarnished. You could certainly conclude that they failed to reach their full potential.

And it's in this context of this unreached potential that we find the scene in Joshua 17 as the children of Joseph approach Joshua with a complaint. It seems that they weren't happy with their designated portion of inheritance. They felt they ought to have more. Joshua is quite happy to accommodate their request and so he says to them in v. 15 *get thee up to the wood country, and cut down for thyself there in the land of the Perizzites, and of the giants, if mount Ephraim be too narrow for thee.* Then comes the complaint in v. 16 *all the Canaanites that dwell in the land of the valley have chariots of iron, both they who are of Beth-shean and her towns, and they who are of the valley of Jezreel.*

It is at this point that Joshua makes a very telling statement about the children of Joseph, a statement, I believe that could be applied to any and all Christians. Notice what he says in v. 17 *Thou art a great people, and hast great power: thou shalt not have one lot only.* Underscore that statement *you have great power.*

When we get to heaven we're certainly going to discover a number of things. And these things will contribute to our joy and to our amazement. We will know, in much fuller measure the greatness of the Savior we serve but it's also quite possible that we will discover things that had we discovered while we were in the world we would have utilized our blessings much more effectively. Of the things we'll discover, I think we're going to discover that we had great power.

And could it be that we'll be baffled by that discovery so that we find ourselves asking ourselves *why didn't I use it? I could have done so much more for the Lord than I did if only I had realized that I had great power at my disposal.* And among the things to be lamented in heaven there will be this – that like the sons of Joseph, we too had great power but like the sons of Joseph, we too failed to utilize that power. We failed to reach the potential we could have reached had we only known and truly believed that we had great power.

I want to address that issue this morning and I want to address it from the perspective of aiming to reach more of our potential as Christians. As the Lord's people we are a great people and we do have great power. How, then, can we utilize more effectively that power? Simply put:

## We Can and Should Reach a Higher Level of Our Potential as Christians

How can we reach that higher level of potential? That's the question I want to raise and answer this morning. If we would reach a higher level of our potential then:

### I. We Must Face the Truth of That Potential

Note again the words of our text and notice how Joshua states it as something factual: V. 17: *And Joshua spake unto the house of Joseph, [even] to Ephraim and to Manasseh, saying, Thou [art] a great people, and hast great power: thou shalt not have one lot [only].*

It makes you wonder whether or not these children of Joseph were surprised at Joshua's agreement with their claim that they made a few verses earlier. Jos 17:14 *And the children of Joseph spake unto Joshua, saying, Why hast thou given me [but] one lot and one portion to inherit, seeing I [am] a great people, forasmuch as the LORD hath blessed me hitherto?*

Joshua does not dispute their claim. In fact he adds to it by telling them not only that they were a great people but that they possessed great power. They were Israelites, after all. And you might recall that the name *Israel* was originally given to Jacob back in Gen.

32:28 because of the power that Jacob had with God and with men. *Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.*

This name, Israel, would be the designated term for all the children of God. We know them as the 12 tribes of Israel. Sometimes they are, to be sure, referred to as the sons of Jacob, but their proper designation is the children of Israel. And in a spiritual sense you and I are children of Israel. So Paul writes in Gal. 3:7 *Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.* And near the end of his epistle to the Galatians he writes in 6:16 *And as many as walk according to this rule, this rule meaning the rule of the gospel, peace [be] on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.*

And if this term, Israel, spiritually speaking belongs to you and belongs to me then it means that this statement back in our text in Joshua 17:17 applies to us – we are a great people and we have great power. Now on the surface of it you may marvel. Like Nicodemus before Christ you may find yourselves saying *How can these things be? I have great power? I sure don't feel very powerful.* Indeed the very opposite is the case. I feel incredibly weak. How can such a statement be applied to you and me?

And the answer is, of course, that it can be applied to you and me the same way it was applied to the sons of Joseph. And what did Joshua really mean when he said to them they had great power? He obviously meant that they served a great God who was and is the source of all power. So we read back in Josh. 3:10 *And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God [is] among you, and [that] he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Hivites, and the Perizzites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Jebusites.* Notice here that God is the One credited for driving out the Canaanites.

And in Josh. 13:6 *All the inhabitants of the hill country from Lebanon unto Misrephothmaim, [and] all the Sidonians, them will I drive out from before the children of Israel: only divide thou it by lot unto the Israelites for an inheritance, as I have commanded thee.*

In 14:12 we find Caleb, the last surviving contemporary with Joshua making the connection between the Lord's action and his own action. Josh. 14:12 *Now therefore give me this mountain, whereof the LORD spake in that day; for thou heardest in that day how the Anakims [were] there, and [that] the cities [were] great [and] fenced: if so be the LORD [will be] with me, then I shall be able to drive them out, as the LORD said.*

Here is what bridges the gap between the Lord's great power and our great power. It is the Lord being with us and the Lord honoring his word. The thing that distinguished Caleb and Joshua from their contemporaries was their faith in the truth that God was with them and that God would be true to his word.

So the sons of Joseph were a great people with great power. You and I are a great people with great power. This is due to the fact that we believe in a Savior who has all power and

authority committed unto him. The question that we must now consider is how is this power to be used? What are we expected to do with this great power?

And the answer is that we're expected to do the same thing the children of Joseph were expected to do. We're expected to prevail in our lives. We're expected to subdue those chariots of iron that we find spiritually speaking within and without. When you stop and think about it can't you say that you have already known the manifestation of this great power?

Think of what you were before the Lord saved you. Think of the mastery that sin had over you. Think of where you would be today, though it be dreadful to think upon it, had the Lord not saved you. Would you even be alive? Would you not quite likely be burning in hell? At the very least you would be bound in the slavery of sin. You would be living under the weight of sin's guilt and sin's dominion. You would be desperately trying to convince yourself that true happiness can be found in the world's ways and in the world's rewards. And as you progressed your burden would only grow heavier.

But by the power of God you were able to rid yourself of that heavy burden. You gained a joy and a peace and a freedom that filled your heart with praise and thanksgiving and in the power of gratitude you began to conquer those sins that had the mastery over you. You learned the truth that Paul learned and that he expresses in *Php 4:13 I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

And the all things that Paul refers to here I believe can be divided into the two categories that we find in Heb. 11. Heb. 11, you recall, is that great chapter on faith in the New Testament. And on the one hand we find the power of God through faith manifested in the exploits that men in the past have done. So we read in Heb. 11:33,34 *Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.*

This is the one category that we like to think upon and dream about. O that I might do great exploits for God. And yet this is one of two categories. The other category is perhaps the greater manifestation of power. For not only is there a category of positive exploits but there's also a category of total surrender to the will of God. So we read in Heb 11:36 *And others had trial of [cruel] mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment.* "Trials of cruel mockings." Can you relate to that statement? I know there are those here this morning that have endured such trials and the thing that at times makes them seem most cruel is the devil's notion that God himself is the One who mocks you. God Himself is the One who is being cruel to you. But here is where power manifests itself. I surrender to him anyway. I continue to trust him. I continue to love him. I continue to serve him. And like Job of old who considered his own trial to be a cruel mocking from God, he would nevertheless say *though he slay me, yet will I trust him.*

What power! What faith is this that maintains loyalty to God and to Christ even during the times when you do not understand what God is doing and why. So we have this power,

this great power, to overcome and to submit. If I could refer to Jacob one more time let me just mention before we leave this point that this great power includes the power to prevail with God and with men. That's why Jacob was renamed Israel – *for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.*

I read such a statement and perhaps you do too and it causes you to sigh. I'm happy to think that in some respects I can trace the great power of God in me. I wouldn't be saved if I didn't know something of that power. But do I prevail with God in the place of prayer? And do I prevail with men? Here it is especially that I must confess that I come woefully short of meeting the potential for God's power that I should know.

And this leads to my next point. We've seen that if we would reach more of our potential then we face the truth of that potential. We must affirm, in other words the truth of the text which tells us that we are a great people and we have great power. Why, then, does the statement of our text seem a million miles away from our experience?

## II. We Must Identify the Causes for Unreached Potential

The sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, can be very helpful to us here. Why didn't they reach the potential of their power? The first thing we may note about the cause of their unreached potential was their pride.

*We are a great people* they affirm in v. 14. And yet their greatness had made them delusional. Listen to the words of one commentator about their assertion of greatness:

*Seeing I am a great people: The assertion can hardly have been warranted by facts, for at the census {#Nu 26} the two tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim together were not greatly more numerous than the single tribe of Judah; and now that half the Manassites were provided for on the eastern side of Jordan, the remaining children of Joseph could hardly be stronger than the Danites or the Issacharites. The children of Joseph seem therefore to exhibit here that arrogant and jealous spirit which elsewhere characterizes their conduct.*

Here is where their pride made them delusional. They thought that because of their own estimation of their greatness their lives ought to be easy. They ought to be given more by Joshua but to have to fight for it? Are you kidding? We're a great people – how can you expect us to fight for our blessings and especially to fight against iron chariots?

Their pride made them delusional. There's something about pride, you know, that should cause us as Christians to have great concern. We know, as Christians, that our blessings come to us by God's grace, which means then that the power we need to live and to conquer and to surrender must come through God's grace. We know this. We affirm this. No Christian would be so foolish as to deny this. We are dependent upon grace. We need grace to flow fully and freely to our souls that we might know all the benefits that grace conveys to us.

And this is all very good but the danger we face now enters the picture this way. The one thing that can restrict the flow of grace to our souls is our pride. *God resisteth the proud* James writes in his epistle 4:6 – *God resisteth the proud but giveth grace unto the humble.*

Do you see what this means in terms of striving to meet our potential? Our striving must be the striving for humility. Our striving must be the striving to be low before God. When we begin to lift ourselves up we also begin to lose the potential for knowing the greatness of our power.

Peter says the same thing. Listen to his words in 1Pet. 5:5 *Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all [of you] be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.* Peter and James both make that same identical statement – God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. This is why we must be clothed with humility. We won't and we can't and we shouldn't know God's grace when we vaunt ourselves. Rather than know God's grace we'll know God's resistance. His power will have to be exercised against us rather than for us so that we'll be brought low and thus be enabled to know his power again.

So pride is a primary cause in our failure to reach our potential as Christians. Another factor that figures into the equation is the factor of walking by sight rather than by faith. Faith, you see, can see unseen things. Faith enables us to see the greatness of our God and the greatness of his power. Sight enables us to see the greatness and strength of the obstacles we face.

What did the sons of Joseph see? Verse 16 tells us: *all the Canaanites that dwell in the land of the valley have chariots of iron, both they who are of Bethshean and her towns, and they who are of the valley of Jezreel.* It would seem, wouldn't it, that the sons of Joseph had done some work in intelligence or in scouting. It's interesting to note how they report not just the presence of iron chariots but that *all the Canaanites* have iron chariots. The Canaanites in the valley have iron chariots. The Canaanites in Bethshean have iron chariots. The Canaanites in the towns around Bethshean have iron chariots. The Canaanites in the valley of Jezreel have iron chariots.

They certainly knew how to measure their opponents and calculate their strength. But they sure had lost sight of God. They were blinded so badly by iron chariots that they forgot the power that had brought them out of Egypt. They forgot the power that enabled them to cross Jordan. They forgot the power that brought down the walls of Jericho, the power that enabled them up to that point to conquer so much of Canaan.

And when we're blinded by what the eye of the flesh sees then we certainly will fail to reach the potential of our power. And so two things come into play here that must be identified and overcome. We must overcome pride because it restricts the flow of grace that is an absolute must when it comes to knowing God's power. And we must identify and overcome sight prevailing over faith. There is one more point we must consider when it comes to reaching more of our potential.

### III. We Must Apply the Remedy for Unreached Potential

I have referenced the children of Israel at Kadesh Barnea many times. It was at Kadesh Barnea that the preceding generation of Israelites demonstrated their unbelief. They were

dominated, like Joseph's sons by what they saw. 10 of the 12 spies sent out by Moses testified that they saw walled cities. They saw giants in the land. They saw formidable foes and came to the conclusion that there was no way they could take possession of the promised land.

Joshua and Caleb were among the 12 spies sent into the land. They gave the minority report in which they said in Nu 14:8 *If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.* Success or failure – power or impotence hinged on this one thing – *If the LORD delight in us.*

If we believe that our God and our Savior loves us then we will know his power. It's the power of love and it will enable us to do exploits and it will enable us to surrender to God's will. In Rev. 12:11 we're told of those wage war against the devil. *And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*

I use to marvel at this last phrase especially *they loved not their lives unto the death.* Here is complete surrender to Christ but what are we talking about in this complete surrender? Are these Christians who managed to develop such a stoical attitude toward life that they could advance with no regard for their lives?

And then I found the necessary cross-reference that enables me to understand the meaning of this phrase *they loved not their lives unto the death.* Ps 63:3 *Because thy lovingkindness [is] better than life, my lips shall praise thee.* Here's the key to loving not our lives unto the death. We've found something better than life – and by life I refer to the lives we now live in this present sin-cursed world. I refer to our lives even as Christians in which the Spirit lusteth against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit so that we cannot do the things that we would which means simply that in this world there's a sense in which we will never fully realize our potential.

But we've found something better than the earthly lives we now live. We have found the lovingkindness of Christ which is better than life because it lifts us up to where we enjoy spiritual life and eternal life with Jesus Christ our King. And to the degree that this lovingkindness will rule our hearts, to that same degree we will apply the remedy to the causes that keep us from reaching our potential in fuller measure.

There is no power like the power of Christ's love. There is no power like the power of the cross to compel you to conquer Canaan and to gain victory even over those sins and obstacles in your lives that are like iron chariots.

Let me close with something anecdotal. We have learned to our dismay that another state in our union voted over the weekend to grant the right to homosexuals to marry each other. Talk about an iron chariot – it seems impossible to stop the flood tide of abomination. But earlier in the day I had read an article that was sent to me that was actually printed in the New York Times.

It was a lengthy article about a gay man who was going to visit an ex-gay friend of his. I'll quote you a couple of paragraphs from that article:

Though Michael had agreed to let me visit and write about him, he was skeptical about my motivations. "Why are you here?" he asked minutes after we sat down in the cafe, which was decorated with Christmas lights and staffed by a young waiter attending the Bible school.

It was a good question. Had part of me come to "save" my old friend from the clutches of the Christian right? Though I don't doubt that sexual attraction can evolve, I was skeptical of Michael's claim of heterosexuality — and I rejected his argument that "homosexuality prevents us from finding our true self within." Besides, I had a hard time believing that Michael's "true self" was a fundamentalist Christian who writes derogatorily about being gay. But whatever aspirations I had about persuading Michael to join the ranks of ex-ex-gays, they were no match for his eagerness to save me.

"God loves you more than any dude will ever love you," he told me at the cafe. "Don't put your faith in some man, some *flesh*. That's what we do when we're stuck in the gay identity, when we're stuck in that *cave*. We go from guy to guy, looking for someone to love us and make us feel O.K., but God is so much better than all the other masters out there." The author goes on to describe Michael's experience of being born again and finding his desires changed not through any kind of rehabilitation program but through the power of the new birth.

I read that article and came away saying – this is the way homosexuality needs to be fought and defeated. And I'm encouraged to think that there are more of these kinds of stories than we know. These aren't the kinds of things you would ordinarily read in the New York Times or any other news publications – conservative or liberal. And I'm not suggesting that we give up in our efforts to combat homosexuality in the realm of politics but what I am suggesting is that if we want real and lasting victory then we have to get to the heart of the matter. We have to be so governed by Christ's love that we can announce and demonstrate to the homosexual that Christ loves sinners.

We are a great people and we have great power at our disposal. May that power work in us and through us enabling us to conquer Canaan and every iron chariot we confront.