

The Book of Joshua
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All scripture taken from the NIV

Lesson 1
Background and Introduction
Joshua 1:1–9

Read: Joshua 1:1–9

¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴ Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵ No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. ⁶ Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

⁷ "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Question: What is the significance of this moment?

History

Around 2000 BC, in Genesis 12, God commands Abram (Abraham) to leave his home and move to Canaan, promising, "To your offspring I will give this land" (v. 7). Several generations later, Joseph the son of Jacob (Israel) is sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37). By God's grace, he becomes vizier of Egypt, bringing his

entire family to Egypt to care for them during the famine (Gen. 46). After Joseph, the Israelites are enslaved by a new Egyptian king (Ex. 1).

After 400 years of this slavery, God sends Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex. 3). From the ten plagues to the crossing of the Red Sea to the manna in the desert, this generation of Israelites witnesses more miracles than any in history before the coming of Jesus Christ. But when the time comes to move into the Promised Land, they refuse to trust God (Num. 13, 14):

^{13:32} [The spies] spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. ³³ We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

^{14:1} That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. ² All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

After all the miracles they've seen, after all that God has done for them, this degree of unbelief is, frankly, astonishing. God is not pleased. He sends them back to the wilderness for good, saying:

Not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it... In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you. I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together

against me. They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die.
(Num. 14:22–23; 30–35).

And this is exactly what happens. As the book of Joshua begins—some 700 years after God promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham—this generation has died off, and Joshua and the people of Israel are now ready to possess the land.

The territory promised to Israel is described, somewhat vaguely, as the land “from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the desert to the Euphrates River” (Ex. 23:31). As we shall see, the possession of the Promised Land was a long, multi-generational process. Indeed, the amount of territory Israel controlled fluctuated substantially over its history, reaching a peak under David and Solomon. At its height, it included not only modern-day Israel, but portions of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

Who was Joshua?

Joshua son of Nun was a descendant of Joseph the son of Jacob. Moses changes his name from *Hoshea* (“salvation”) to *Yeshua* (“Yahweh is salvation”)—that is, Joshua (Num. 13:16). At the time the book of Joshua begins, Joshua has spent most of his life as Moses’ aide, right-hand man, and general: He waits on Mount Sinai during the 40 days that Moses spends with God on the mountain (Ex. 24:13). He guards the tent of meeting, the precursor to the tabernacle, where God met with Israel (Ex. 33:7–11).

He is one of the twelve men sent to spy out the Promised Land (Num. 13), and he and Caleb are the only ones with faith that God would deliver it to them. When God punishes Israel’s unbelief, Joshua and Caleb are the only ones from the exodus generation who do not die in the wilderness (Num. 14:30).

God appoints Joshua Moses’ successor as the leader of the people (Num. 27:12–23): Moses lays his hands on him and Joshua becomes “filled with the spirit of wisdom” (Deut. 34:9). He is the undisputed leader of Israel.

God’s commission to Joshua

In Joshua 1:1–9, God commissions Joshua for the work of conquering the Promised Land, famously telling him to be “strong and courageous.” By this time, Joshua has already established himself as one of the most faithful, obedient, and unflawed figures in an Old Testament filled with flawed heroes; there is every

reason to expect him to respond in faithful obedience (as indeed he does). Of greater concern is the response of the people he leads; since they left Egypt, the Israelites have established a track record of whining and idolatrous disobedience.

Fortunately, this younger generation that Joshua commands is better suited to the task than the previous one: Joshua's Israelites were raised in the wilderness, not in Egypt. They grew up eating the manna God provided and living in obedience to the law Moses received from God on Mount Sinai. They have spent their lives being trained to trust and obey God, and they are now ready to follow God's plan to possess the land of Canaan.

Three primary issues run through the book of Joshua, and all three appear in God's words to Joshua in 1:1–9.

First, the conquest of the Promised Land. God is both the initiator of and a participant in this conquest (he is, in fact, the central character of the book of Joshua—as he is with so much of the Bible). While it is God alone who gives victory, the Israelites are active participants in God's plan, even as he fights for them. Israel's holy war has three purposes: to give the Israelites the land and rest God has promised, to punish the Canaanites for their sin, and to purge the land of idolatry.

Second, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to give the land of Canaan to his descendants.

Third, the nation of Israel's covenant loyalty to God. Military victory and blessing are conditional on obedience to God. In this generation as well as in future ones, Israel's faithfulness is the key to her success and prosperity, and her unfaithfulness is the catalyst for her failure and ruin.

All three of these themes continue from Deuteronomy, and issues with covenant loyalty will continue to plague Israel for hundreds of years, throughout the time of the judges and in the united and divided monarchies.

In subsequent lessons, we will see how these three themes run through the historical account of the book of Joshua as well as the implications they have for us as people of the New Testament.

Discussion

Question: In the span of four verses (vv. 6–9), God tells Joshua to be “strong and courageous” three times. Why this repetition?

Verse 9 is telling here: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Fear and discouragement were exactly the problem with the previous generation. The spies—leaders of the people—scouted the land, returned, and (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb) said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are” (Num. 13:31). They spread panic among the people—this panic is rooted in unbelief.

Question: The Israelites of Joshua’s generation saw the same miracles that Joshua did, but when the time came to enter the Promised Land, they had a completely faithless response.

-How does such a thing happen?

-How can we keep ourselves from responding faithlessly when God calls us to action?

Question: Many of us have seen God work in our lives in various ways. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to trust God for new challenges and troubles.

-Why?

-How can we develop a more God-oriented, faith-filled outlook like Joshua’s?

Lesson 2
Entering the Promised Land
Joshua 1:10–4:24

Last week: After Moses died, God told Joshua to be “strong and courageous” in leading the Israelites into the Promised Land to conquer it (Joshua 1:1–9).

Joshua 1:10–18

In response to this command, Joshua orders his officers to get ready for the military invasion across the Jordan River. The tribes that have already received their land inheritance—Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh—are ordered to send their fighting men to help their fellow Israelites “until the Lord gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land that the Lord your God is giving them” (v. 15).

The people reply to Joshua with impressive faith (vv. 16–18): “Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses ... Only be strong and courageous!”

If the faithfulness of this response seems surprising, recall that this is not the whining, fearful generation that God sentenced to death in the wilderness, but the subsequent one, which grew up in that wilderness, eating the manna God provided and living under the law given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. In any case, it is a remarkable contrast to the constant unbelief of the Israelites in the wilderness.

Read: Joshua 2

¹ Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

² The king of Jericho was told, “Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” ³ So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

⁴ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from.” ⁵ At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don’t know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.” ⁶ (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the

stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)⁷ So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸ Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof⁹ and said to them, “I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

¹² “Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign¹³ that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death.”

¹⁴ “Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don’t tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.”

¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall.¹⁶ She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.”

¹⁷ Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us¹⁸ unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house.¹⁹ If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them.

²⁰ But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.”

²¹ “Agreed,” she replied. “Let it be as you say.”

So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

²² When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them.²³ Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them.²⁴ They said to Joshua, “The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us.”

Joshua’s first move is to send two men to spy out the land. Note the contrast between this passage and the last time spies featured prominently in Israel’s history. In Numbers

13, Moses' spies travel throughout the Promised Land, then return and say, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are," and they spread a bad report among the people. In contrast, Joshua's spies say, "The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."

Question: What is remarkable about this story?

Question: Why is these spies' report so different?

Answer: These spies are remembering and focusing on the mighty acts that God has done for the people of Israel in the past (see vv. 8–11), whereas for the spies in Numbers 13, God's miraculous works (bringing them out of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, etc.) seem, for some reason, to count for nothing.

Rahab is another person who is mindful of God's power. She tells the spies, "The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (v. 11)—this is an absolutely remarkable statement for a pagan in a pagan city to make. Rahab has heard of some of the previous victories that God has given to Israel, and she believes that God will give Israel victory over Jericho as well. This faith leads her to take the risky move of hiding the spies in exchange for the lives of her family when Jericho falls.

Question: Why is Rahab a significant biblical figure?

Answer: After the fall of Jericho, Rahab marries into the tribe of Judah, where she becomes an ancestor of King David and of Jesus. She is one of the few women listed in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–16). The writer of Hebrews includes her among his heroes of faith (Heb. 11:31). James the brother of Jesus cites Rahab along with Abraham as examples of people who showed their faith through their actions (James 2:25).

Joshua 3

God tells Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses" (v. 7).

Following the good report of the spies, the Israelites set out to cross the Jordan River. Joshua has been waiting for this for 40 years, ever since he was a member of Moses' initial group of spies—and one of only two who did not display unfaithful cowardice.

The people are led by priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Ten Commandments and which serves as the altar of God during the Feast of Atonement.

Israel's most significant artifact, the ark represents God's presence among the people in a literal way.

Crossing the Jordan in its flood stage with an army would have been a tremendously challenging undertaking. In a miracle that obviously calls to mind the parting of the Red Sea with Moses some 40 years earlier, when the ark reaches the river, God causes the water to "pile up in a heap" and stop flowing. The priests with the ark wait on the dry riverbed while the entire nation crosses past them.

This miracle serves several purposes. First, it enables an otherwise difficult river crossing. Second, it explicitly shows the people that God is with them in the tasks that lie ahead of them, just as he had been with the previous generation, which he brought out of Egypt. Third, it shows the people that God is with Joshua as the leader of Israel just as he had been with Moses.

Joshua 4

While the nation is crossing, Joshua has twelve men—one from each tribe—take stones from the middle of the Jordan and build a monument to commemorate this miracle: "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' Tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the people of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God" (vv. 21–24).

As we see throughout the Old Testament, the construction of stone monuments to commemorate significant events—especially events of divine intervention—was a common practice in the ancient world. Jacob builds one after his dream of the ladder to heaven and God's promise to give his descendants the Promised Land, and he builds another when he makes a covenant with his father-in-law Laban. Moses builds one when God confirms the covenant with Israel (Ex. 24:4). Joshua will build another when the covenant is renewed (Josh. 24:26). Samuel will erect one when God intervenes directly in a military victory over the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:12).

When all the people have crossed, the priests bring the ark up out of the Jordan, and the waters return to their course. Joshua's army of 40,000 (v. 13) is now in the theater of war.

Discussion

Question: The basis for God's covenant with Israel is promises he made to give them peace and prosperity in the Promised Land. In return, Israel promises to obey God's commands.

-As New Testament people, what has God done for us?

-What is our response/obligation to God in return?

Question: Rahab is a pagan from a thoroughly pagan culture who likely had no direct contact with Israelite worship or Israel's God, but she is immediately prepared to risk her life to align herself with Yahweh. In twenty-first century America, faith is not a life-or-death matter like it was for her.

-Does this make it easier or harder to have faith?

-Why?

Question: The Israelites erected stone monuments to remember the good things God had done in their history.

-Why is it important for us to remember the good things that God has done, both in our lives and in the more distant past?

-What happens if we forget?

-What are things we can do to remember?

Lesson 3
Preparing for Battle
Joshua 5:1–6:5

Last week: After the death of Moses, God commands Joshua to be “strong and courageous” in leading the new generation of faithful and obedient Israelites into the Promised Land. Joshua sends spies to Jericho; these spies are protected by Rahab, ancestor of King David and Jesus. The spies return and report the land ready for conquest. Through a miracle that calls to mind the parting of the Red Sea with Moses forty years previous, Israel crosses the Jordan River and sets up camp in Canaan, preparing for battle.

Joshua 5:1: “Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.”

This phrasing echoes Rahab’s words in Joshua 2: “I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (vv. 9–11).

Word of the Israelites and their powerful God is getting around.

Read: Joshua 5:2–9

² At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.” ³ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth.

⁴ Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. ⁵ All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not. ⁶ The Israelites had moved about in the wilderness forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, since they had not obeyed the Lord. For the Lord

had sworn to them that they would not see the land he had solemnly promised their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷ So he raised up their sons in their place, and these were the ones Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way.

⁸ And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed.

⁹ Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.

Question: What is the purpose and significance of circumcision?

In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abraham in which he promises that Abraham's descendants will be numerous beyond counting and that he will give these descendants the Promised Land.

As a sign of this covenant, God commands Abraham and every male in his household to undergo circumcision (Gen. 17). This is to be an "everlasting covenant" (v. 13), and anyone not undergoing circumcision is to be "cut off" from the people for breaking the covenant (v. 14). Thus, this act of circumcision clearly identifies this generation of Israelites, the heirs of the Promised Land, as participating members in God's covenant.

In addition to this physical circumcision, Moses had commanded the people to "circumcise their hearts" (Deut. 10:16), later telling them, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut. 30:6).

What does this mean, "circumcision of the heart"? Saint Paul picks up on this metaphor in Romans 2: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (vv. 28–29). Thus, circumcision of the heart is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit within believers, which is foretold even here.

Read: Joshua 5:10–12

¹⁰ On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. ¹¹ The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. ¹² The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

Circumcision was also necessary for the people to celebrate the Passover (Ex. 12:48).

Question: What does Passover commemorate?

Passover commemorates the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of their exodus. How inspiring it must have been for the Israelites to celebrate this historic event—divinely given victory over a superior enemy—before the beginning of their military campaign.

Question: What is the significance of the manna stopping?

God gave Israel manna all the years they spent in the wilderness. The end of the manna means that their time of wandering is at an end as well, and they will henceforth eat “the produce of Canaan” exclusively.

Read: Joshua 5:13–6:5

^{5:13} Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?”

¹⁴ “Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?”

¹⁵ The commander of the Lord’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

^{6:1} Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.

² Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in.”

Here is yet another event with a parallel to the previous generation. There are obvious similarities between this passage and the story of Moses and the burning bush (Ex. 3),

during which God likewise told Moses, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

God gives Joshua a seemingly nonsensical set of instructions for capturing Jericho. There are plenty of examples of this sort throughout the Old Testament—Gideon dismissing 98% of his army (Judg. 7) and the leprous Naaman bathing ten times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5) come readily to mind.

A fair question is, *Why?* Why all this song and dance? If God wants Jericho wiped out, the quickest and simplest solution is to rain fire from heaven—God still gets all the supernatural credit that way.

Question: Why didn’t God simply knock the walls down right off the bat and smite the people of Jericho?

To do so would have left out an important part of the equation: the Israelites themselves. God could have perfectly well wiped out every single inhabitant of the Promised Land before the Israelites even got there. But God is looking for participation.

Throughout the Bible (and throughout human history), God has included humanity (and the Jews in particular, obviously) in his plan. *Why?* It is through participation in God’s plan that we demonstrate our faith. It is through cooperation with God that our faith grows and matures. This is why we were created—to be, as we say so frequently, part of God’s story.

Imagine participating in that parade around the walls of Jericho. In spite of everything God has done to this point, in spite of all the miracles you’ve seen, you’d probably be at least slightly confused. You’d probably feel vaguely embarrassed or a little bit silly as you marched around the city, with the people of Jericho watching in bewildered amusement from the walls. You’ve got to do this for seven days—that’s plenty of time to wonder about, to doubt what God has commanded.

But you have skin in the game now as a participant in the covenant relationship. You have a share in the reward. You become an active part of the pattern God sets forth: he commands, you respond with faithful obedience, and he provides and blesses.

Discussion

Question: Circumcision was the physical symbol of belonging to the original covenant God made with Israel.

-Why is physical circumcision not a symbol of belonging to the new covenant made through Jesus? (See Rom. 2:25–29; 4:7–12).

-What does it mean for us as Christians to have “circumcised” hearts?

Question: Joshua asks the angel, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” The angel responds in an unexpected way: “Neither, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” This can be an unexpected response for us as well. In wars and in politics throughout history all the way up to the present day, we hear, “God is on our side” (often, we hear this from both sides). This is a wrong mindset.

God’s answer to “Whose side are you on?” is, in essence, “I am God. Be on my side.” Throughout the Bible, God is not looking for sides to take—to pick a human agenda. Rather, he is looking for people who will be on his side—to pursue God’s agenda.

-What does it mean to be on God’s side?

-What are some ways we fail to be on God’s side?

-How do we go about being on his side?

Question: Throughout the Old Testament, God uses both the nation of Israel and certain individuals as active participants in his plan.

-As New Testament people to whom God has given the Holy Spirit, how do we participate in God’s plan?

-What has God asked of us?

Lesson 4
Jericho
Joshua 6:6–27

Last week: Having crossed the Jordan, Joshua circumcises the men of Israel, and the nation celebrates the Passover. An angel of the Lord appears to Joshua and gives him instructions for the taking of Jericho. This will be Israel's first battle in the conquest west of the Jordan.

Today, we're looking at one of the most well-known stories in the entire Old Testament, one that's a regular staple in children's Bibles. Many of us had at least a basic awareness of this story by the time we were three years old or so. Our kids know about it from *VeggieTales*.

If you asked twenty people around church, "Do you know the story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho?" there's a decent chance you'd get an affirmative response from all twenty. But how well do we know it? When we've been so saturated with a story from such a young age, we run the risk of really knowing only the children's version. But the biblical account is quite a bit more complex.

Read: Joshua 6:6–16, 20

⁶ So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it." ⁷ And he ordered the army, "Advance! March around the city, with an armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD."

⁸ When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them. ⁹ The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the trumpets were sounding. ¹⁰ But Joshua had commanded the army, "Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!" ¹¹ So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once. Then the army returned to camp and spent the night there.

¹² Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. ¹³ The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the

trumpets kept sounding. ¹⁴ So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

¹⁵ On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. ¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!” . . .

²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city.

That’s the part of the story you’re no doubt familiar with. But note that we skipped some verses. We’ll come back to that.

So what’s going on here? As we discussed last week, God has given Jericho to Israel—but they must still fight for it. The nation of Israel must be an active participant in God’s plan, not a bystander. They must respond to God’s commands with faithful obedience. This they do here. They march around the city for seven days, led by the priests and the ark—the physical embodiment of God’s presence among the people—for no apparent purpose other than obedience. Because they obey, the conquest of the Promised Land starts with a bang: the walls collapse and the city falls, entirely by God’s power.

Read: Joshua 6:16–25

¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city! ¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. ¹⁸ But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. ¹⁹ All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury.”

²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. ²¹ They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

²² Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, “Go into the prostitute’s house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with

your oath to her.”²³ So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

²⁴ Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD’s house. ²⁵ But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

Question: What stands out in this passage? Is there anything here you hadn’t previously associated with the Jericho story?

Verse 21 may stand out most strongly, especially if we haven’t been paying close attention to the context of the narrative from the departure from Egypt to this point. They “destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old.”

We have a word for acts of violence against people groups for the purpose of exterminating them: *genocide*. That is what this is: not merely military conquest, but the extermination of the people of Jericho (with the exception, as promised, of Rahab and her family).

Question: Why would God order the Israelites to kill every single person—the women, the children, the “innocents”?

It can be difficult in any case to wrap our minds around the brutality of the ancient world, but some considerations will perhaps help us understand all the reasons behind this harsh proscription.

First and best known, *God has promised to give the Israelites the Promised Land, and to give them rest in it* (Gen. 12:7; 15:17–21; Josh. 1:13). Obviously, the land cannot be given to them unless it is taken from its previous occupants. But this is not the only reason.

Second, *God is punishing the people of Canaan for their sins*. The time it takes for the promise to Abraham to be fulfilled is interesting. Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph brings the family to Egypt, where the people spend 400 years as slaves. By the time Joshua’s army arrives to occupy the land, about 700 years have passed since the original promise was made.

Why so long? One likely reason is that the Israelites weren't the only people group that had an effect on the timeline. We find a clue in what God says to Abraham: "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen. 15:16). The sins of the Canaanites are a major factor.

In Deuteronomy 18, God commands, "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you" (vv. 9–13).

These are the sins of the Canaanites: idolatry, witchcraft, child sacrifice. The Canaanites are hardly innocent victims. God is punishing them for generations of this behavior, and he is using the army of Israel as his instrument of punishment just as he will use the Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, and others as instruments of punishment against Israel when they are unfaithful in the future.

Third, *God wants to protect Israel from foreign idolatrous practices*. If the people of Jericho and the other city-states of Canaan had been allowed to remain, to share the land, even as subservient vassals, this is absolutely what would have happened. How do we know? Because this is exactly what happens every time the nation of Israel intermingles with foreign nations, seeking to benefit themselves through trade and commerce and through political alliances that replace reliance on God.

We see it time and time again in the book of Judges. We even see it with King Solomon, the wisest man of all, as he allows foreign worship into Israel through his marriages to the daughters of foreign kings in the name of military alliance—this is, in fact, the reason God splits the kingdom after his death. And we see it over and over in the Divided Kingdom, frequently in Judah and constantly in Israel.

I am under no illusions that these explanations will fully "justify" Israel's extermination of the Canaanites to our modern Western minds. This is a difficult issue, and we will discuss it further next week.

Joshua 6:26–27

A footnote of sorts: In the concluding verses of this chapter, Joshua places a curse on Jericho: “Cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: at the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates” (v. 26).

Question: Why would Joshua put a curse on the city? What message do these events send, and to whom?

Interestingly, we see this curse come to pass. The writer of 1 Kings has it acutely in mind when he tells us, “In Ahab’s time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun” (16:34).

We see it again in 1 Maccabees, an apocryphal book covering the intertestamental second century BC. Simon Maccabeus, high priest and commander of the Jewish army in revolt against the Greek Seleucid Empire, had fortifications built at Jericho. When he and his sons Mattathias and Judas came to inspect Jericho, they were assassinated in a power grab by Simon’s son-in-law, Ptolemy son of Abubos, who had been appointed general over the Plain of Jericho (1 Mac. 16:11–17).

Discussion

Exodus 34 says, “[The Lord] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (vv. 6–7).

As challenging as it can be for us as believers, we may at least trust that the order to exterminate the Canaanites came directly from God. However, it is relatively easy (and understandable) for a nonbeliever or someone unfamiliar with the Bible to say, “Joshua and the Israelites killed every man, woman, and child in Jericho and in other cities. How is their genocide any different from what a modern religious terrorist group like ISIS is doing, or any more excusable?”

-As Christians, what could we say in response?

- How do we make peace between passages that tell us God ordered entire people groups to be wiped out and our belief that God is altogether loving and good?
- What difference does our place in salvation history (i.e., that Christ has died and been raised and we are now participants in a new covenant) make in our understanding of the events of the Old Testament versus modern events?

Lesson 5
Ai and the Sin of Achan
Joshua 7–8

Last week: God gives Israel its first victory in the Promised Land when, after the Israelites follow God's instruction, God causes the walls to fall. Simply put, the victory at Jericho is because of God's direct intervention and because of Israel's faithful obedience, because God intends for the Israelites to be active participants in his plan.

God gives Israel the victory because of the Israelites' obedience in marching around the walls of the city. Following God's instructions, the Israelites kill all the city's inhabitants (except Rahab and her family) and burn the entire city, saving only the gold and silver and other metal articles, which are dedicated to the Lord.

Why do they do this?

As we discussed last week, there are multiple reasons for Israel's war in the Promised Land. The first is to give the land to Israel. The second is to punish the Canaanites, who are guilty of idolatry, child sacrifice, and other terrible sins. The third is to protect Israel from joining in this idolatry.

In Deuteronomy 20, God commands Israel to "completely destroy" six Canaanite groups: the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites because "Otherwise, they will teach you to follow the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God" (vv. 17–18).

For the record, this is not Israel's standard operating procedure; these are special instructions for these nations. Israel's typical rules of engagement could be considered a lot more reasonable (Deut. 20):

¹⁰ When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. ¹¹ If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. ¹² If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. ¹³ When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. ¹⁴ As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. ¹⁵ This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby.

But Jericho is full of Canaanites, and thus Joshua tells the army, “The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord” (v. 17)—that is, destroyed. This devotion to destruction is called *herem* in Hebrew. Its purpose is to preserve the integrity of the worship of God in the nation of Israel by purging harmful elements. As such, Israel’s campaign in Canaan is very much a religious war (or, if you like, a “holy war”). This is why everything is given to the Lord, whether by destruction or allocation to the treasury; the Israelites are not to profit from their conquest of these people apart from receiving the land as an inheritance.

In Joshua 6:18, Joshua gives the army this warning: “But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.” As we will see, this is exactly what happens.

Read: Joshua 7:1–5

¹ But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord’s anger burned against Israel.

² Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, “Go up and spy out the region.” So the men went up and spied out Ai.

³ When they returned to Joshua, they said, “Not all the army will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there.” ⁴ So about three thousand went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, ⁵ who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.

This abject failure is the opposite side of the coin of the total victory at Jericho in the previous chapter.

Achan has violated *herem*, but this violation is as yet unknown to Joshua and the people. He sends out spies to Ai, an Amorite city-state (recall that the Amorites were one of the six peoples the Israelites were commanded to wipe out), and they return with another good report. Ai is smaller than Jericho, so after what’s just happened at Jericho, they thoroughly expect this battle to be a cakewalk. Why wouldn’t they? “You don’t even need to take the whole army,” they say—

most of the soldiers should take the day off. As far as the spies are concerned, it's Mission Accomplished; the entire rest of the Canaan campaign is little more than a mopping-up operation.

Read: Joshua 7:6–15

⁶ Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. ⁷ And Joshua said, "Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! ⁸ Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? ⁹ The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?"

¹⁰ The Lord said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. ¹² That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.

¹³ "Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There are devoted things among you, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.

¹⁴ "'In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe the Lord chooses shall come forward clan by clan; the clan the Lord chooses shall come forward family by family; and the family the Lord chooses shall come forward man by man. ¹⁵ Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the Lord and has done an outrageous thing in Israel!'"

Joshua responds to this defeat exactly as he should. He recognizes the problem immediately. He knows that Israel's military success (or lack thereof) is a religious matter, an issue related to faith and obedience rather than to battle skill or strategy. He and the elders of Israel turn to God in repentance.

God informs Joshua that *herem* has been violated. Here we see explicitly that just as God gives the people victory when they are obedient, he likewise gives them utter defeat when they are disobedient—they will have no military success until the problem is resolved. God then gives specific instructions for identifying the culprit—and then for executing him.

Read: Joshua 7:16–26

¹⁶ Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was chosen. ¹⁷ The clans of Judah came forward, and the Zerahites were chosen. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was chosen. ¹⁸ Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was chosen.

¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

²⁰ Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹ When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

²² So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. ²³ They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the Lord.

²⁴ Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵ Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today.”

Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶ Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Question: Why did God make all the people participate in the identification process rather than simply telling Joshua who was responsible?

Look again at Joshua 7:1. Achan is the only one, we are told, who violates the ban, yet we see, “the *Israelites* were unfaithful.” This is something of an alien concept to our modern, Western individual-centered mindset, but throughout the Old Testament, God’s interactions with Israel are largely at this national level. The covenant is a national covenant. The Israelites are a covenant people. They were delivered from Egypt as a nation, they have victory as a nation, and they experience defeat as a nation. They are judged faithful or unfaithful as a nation.

The events in this passage must have been a remarkable object lesson to the Israelites: all the people gathered together, dread hanging in the air, uncertain, wondering who was going to be singled out for death, hoping against hope that it wasn’t anybody from your family, your clan, your tribe.

Achan is identified as the culprit. He confesses, but because of the nature of his sin—he has stolen from God and violated the holiness of Israel—he must be put to death. Achan is killed, along with his family. His possessions are destroyed. His line is wiped from the earth.

Note that Achan’s ancestry is given for the second time in the chapter: Zerah was a son of Judah himself; Achan has a proud lineage. This prominent man’s unfaithfulness stands in sharp contrast to the faith of Rahab, the pagan prostitute. Achan loses his inheritance, while Rahab gains a share in Israel’s inheritance.

Achan’s death solves the problem: “Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger” (v. 26). Israel is ready to resume its campaign.

Joshua 8:1–29

God tells Joshua that it’s time to try again: “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city” (Josh. 8:1–2).

Joshua obeys. He uses the bulk of his army to lure Ai's forces out of the city, and when they meet him for battle, a hidden wing of Israel's army strolls into the now-empty city and burns it down. Ai's army is caught between Joshua's two groups and is wiped out. God has again given Israel a decisive victory. In contrast to Jericho, where everything was to be destroyed, Israel is allowed to keep the plunder this time.

Joshua 8:30–35

After this victory, Joshua and the people renew the covenant at Mount Ebal, just as Moses had commanded them (Deut. 27:1–8). Joshua copies the law and reads it to the people, exhorting them again to obedience. Given the events of the previous chapters, the timing feels extremely appropriate.

Discussion

Question: Achan took treasures that he “coveted” (Josh. 7:21). He may have rationalized this by telling himself that he wasn't stealing from anyone, but the text makes it clear that he was stealing directly from God.

-What sins do we commit under the rationalization that “it doesn't hurt anybody else”?

-Is there such thing as victimless sin? Why?

-Is there such thing as a “little” sin? Why?

Question: None of us is in danger of being singled out for death for our sin as Achan was, but we must not be so foolish to think that the sins we commit have no effects or ramifications for us, whether or not they are known by others.

-What effects do our hidden sins have on us while we are in the midst of them?

-What is the long-term danger of unaddressed sin?

Question: Many times, people are unwilling to repent of their sin until it is exposed.

-Why?

-How can we avoid this dangerous cycle?

Lesson 6
Further Conquest of the Promised Land
Joshua 9–12

Last week: Because one man, Achan, defies the ban (*herem*) and takes treasure from Jericho, Israel is soundly defeated in their battle against Ai. Joshua leads the people in repentance, and, after the sin is exposed and Achan is put to death, God gives Israel victory over Ai.

Going forward, it is helpful to note that there was no unified nation in Canaan. The population was a variety of people groups—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, etc.—living in independent city-states with their own kings. Thus, only if a number of these city-states form a confederation (as we will see in this lesson) does Israel have to face an enormous unified force.

Joshua 9

Word of Israel's victories in Canaan has gotten around. The other city-states know that they have to do something, or else Israel's God is going to serve them up on a silver platter just like he did Jericho and Ai. Thus, the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—the six groups that God commanded Israel to exterminate in Deuteronomy 20—band together “to make war against Joshua and Israel” (v. 2).

The city-state of Gibeon has a different idea. Gibeon was “an important city, like one of the royal cities; it was larger than Ai, and all its men were good fighters” (10:2). Nevertheless, the people of Gibeon do not expect to win against Israel. Joshua 9:7 and 11:18 identify these people as Hivites; 2 Samuel 21:2 identifies them as Amorites. In either case, Israel's responsibility is to wipe them out entirely.

So the Gibeonites come up with a trick: they disguise themselves as travelers from a foreign land, dressing in worn-out clothes and carrying spoiled food. They come to Joshua and say, “We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us” (v. 6). (God would not permit Israel to make treaties with the peoples of Canaan, but Israel was allowed to make treaties with countries outside of Canaan.)

Read: Joshua 9:7–15

⁷ The Israelites said to the Hivites, “But perhaps you live near us, so how can we make a treaty with you?”

⁸ “We are your servants,” they said to Joshua.

But Joshua asked, “Who are you and where do you come from?”

⁹ They answered: “Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the Lord your God. For we have heard reports of him: all that he did in Egypt, ¹⁰ and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan—Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth. ¹¹ And our elders and all those living in our country said to us, ‘Take provisions for your journey; go and meet them and say to them, “We are your servants; make a treaty with us.”’

¹² This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is. ¹³ And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey.”

¹⁴ The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord.

¹⁵ Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath.

The Israelites have some initial suspicion (v. 7), but an inspection of the Gibeonites’ worn gear and spoiled provisions seems to suffice (v. 15). Joshua agrees to make a treaty with them—this is a suzerain–vassal treaty with Israel dominant and Gibeon subservient.

Question: Falling for the Gibeonite deception is the only major error Joshua makes in his tenure as Israel’s leader. Why did it happen?

Answer: The writer of the book of Joshua includes this telling tidbit in verse 14: “The men of Israel sampled their provisions *but did not inquire of the Lord*” (italics mine).

Three days later, the Israelites find out the truth. The people are angry—but the treaty is permanent. The elders say, “We have given them our oath by the Lord, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now. This is what we will do to them: We will let them live, so that wrath will not fall on us for breaking the oath we swore to them” (vv. 19–20).

Joshua places them under a curse, though: “You will never cease to serve as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God” (v. 23). The Gibeonites naturally find this preferable to being wiped out, and they agree.

An interesting footnote to this account: In 2 Samuel 21, there is a severe famine in Israel. God tells King David that it is because King Saul tried to wipe the Gibeonites out in defiance of this by-then ancient treaty. David asks the Gibeonites what atonement he can make; they ask for seven of Saul’s descendants to put to death. David agrees, and these men are killed. After they are buried, “God answered prayer in behalf of the land” (v. 14), and the famine presumably ended.

Joshua 10

A number of other Canaanite city-states hear about what Gibeon has done, and they are not happy. Led by the king of Jerusalem, five Amorite kings band together and attack Gibeon in retaliation. Recall that Gibeon is described as being *like* one of the royal cities—it does not have its own king and may have owed fealty or allegiance to one or more of these kings. Gibeon appeals to Israel for help; because of the treaty, Joshua is obligated to go.

But God honors Israel’s integrity in keeping the treaty. He tells Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you” (v. 8).

Joshua ambushes the Amorites with his entire army, and God “throws them into confusion” (v. 10). As the Amorites retreat, God rains giant hailstones on them, killing more, the text says, than the Israelites did (v. 11).

Joshua then makes a peculiar request of God: “O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies” (vv. 12–13).

Question: Why does Joshua ask God to extend the day?

Answer: Joshua wants to have enough time before sundown to completely destroy the Amorites; if they escape, they will have the opportunity to regroup and to fortify themselves.

Joshua traps the five Amorite kings in a cave. He captures them and makes an object lesson of them:

Read: Joshua 10:23–27

²³ So they brought the five kings out of the cave—the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon. ²⁴ When they had brought these kings to Joshua, he summoned all the men of Israel and said to the army commanders who had come with him, “Come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings.” So they came forward and placed their feet on their necks.

²⁵ Joshua said to them, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the Lord will do to all the enemies you are going to fight.” ²⁶ Then Joshua put the kings to death and exposed their bodies on five poles, and they were left hanging on the poles until evening.

²⁷ At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the poles and threw them into the cave where they had been hiding. At the mouth of the cave they placed large rocks, which are there to this day.

Again we see “Be strong and courageous,” an encouragement to the Israelites. The kings’ bodies are displayed publicly to show God’s judgment against these sinful kingdoms. They are taken down at sunset, in accordance with the law (Deut. 21:22–23). There’s a nice bit of irony at the end, as Joshua entombs the kings in the very place they hoped to find safety.

Joshua 10:28–12:24

The rest of Joshua 10 and the whole of Joshua 11 are relatively uninteresting accounts of the conquests of various other city-states: whether alone or allied, the Canaanite powers cannot defeat the God of Israel.

Joshua 12 enumerates all the kings that Moses and Joshua defeated. The mistake with Gibeon is not repeated; the other city-states are all destroyed in accordance with the Lord’s command:

Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses (Josh. 11:19–20).

Chapter 11 thus concludes: “So Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war” (v. 23). This is the rest promised to Israel in Deuteronomy 12:10. This is the end of Joshua’s extensive military campaign, which has gone on for years. But, as we shall see, the entirety of the Promised Land has not actually been taken.

Discussion

Question: The Israelites got into a bad situation when they failed to inquire of the Lord (9:14).

-Do we “inquire of the Lord” when we pray? That is, do we ask for God’s counsel, or do we ask only for his help with and blessing on our agenda?

-What aspects of life should we “inquire of the Lord” about?

Question: Joshua made a rather remarkable request of the Lord when he asked for the sun and moon to stand still.

-What things do we ask God for?

-What might we ask God for if our faith was greater, or if our minds were more centered on God as the source of our success and well-being?

Question: Israel was given rest—but they still had to strive to remain faithful to God as well as to hold the land from foreign invaders. For us also, being faithful and obedient to God is an ongoing struggle.

-What are the biggest threats to our obedience?

-How do we combat these threats?

Lesson 7
Dividing the Territory
Joshua 13–22

Last week: Over the course of several years, Israel completes its initial military campaign in the Promised Land, conquering and destroying dozens of Canaanite city-states, and God gives them rest in the land.

This lesson covers a great deal of the text of Joshua—ten chapters—but the bulk of this text is not particularly interesting reading. Most of it describes the allotment of the conquered land to the various tribes, following God’s instructions to Moses in Numbers 33–35.

Joshua 13–19

Read: Joshua 13:1–7

¹ When Joshua had grown old, the Lord said to him, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.

² “This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites, ³ from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite though held by the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron; the territory of the Avvites ⁴ on the south; all the land of the Canaanites, from Arah of the Sidonians as far as Apeh and the border of the Amorites; ⁵ the area of Byblos; and all Lebanon to the east, from Baal Gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo Hamath.

⁶ “As for all the inhabitants of the mountain regions from Lebanon to Misrephoth Maim, that is, all the Sidonians, I myself will drive them out before the Israelites. Be sure to allocate this land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have instructed you, ⁷ and divide it as an inheritance among the nine tribes and half of the tribe of Manasseh.”

Question: If there is still land to be conquered, why is the campaign over?

Read: Joshua 14:6–12

⁶ Now the people of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, “You know what the Lord said to

Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. ⁷ I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, ⁸ but my fellow Israelites who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt in fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly. ⁹ So on that day Moses swore to me, ‘The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.’

¹⁰ “Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! ¹¹ I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. ¹² Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”

Caleb and Joshua were among the spies that Moses sent to explore the Promised Land way back in Numbers 13. After the bad report from the majority of those spies, an entire unbelieving generation was left in the wilderness to die before the conquest of Canaan could take place. Caleb was forty years old at the time of the initial expedition; he is now eighty-five, and Joshua is similar in age: God is finally giving Joshua his retirement, his rest in the land.

Joshua 20

Joshua 20 covers the places designated as “cities of refuge.” What is a city of refuge? In Exodus 21:12–13, God says, “Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate.” In these cases of what we today would call manslaughter, the offender can flee to one of these cities of refuge; as long as he remains there, he is protected by law from blood vengeance by the family of the person killed until he can stand trial (Josh. 20:1–6).

In our modern world of police forces and expansive judicial systems, this may seem like a strange practice. But history shows us that blood feuds can be (and have been) a serious problem in any society without such a far-reaching legal system. They can be a major source of ongoing, escalating violence. The Hatfield–McCoy feud, which took place in America in the 1800s, is a famous example—it lasted nearly thirty years and involved twelve deaths. Imagine, then,

how serious a problem this was likely to be in the comparatively savage ancient world.

Preventing this sort of conflict from escalating is, in fact, the basis for the famous “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” command (Ex. 21:24)—the retaliation should not exceed the original offense.

Joshua 21

All the tribes have now been given portions of the land as their inheritance—except the tribe of Levi.

Question: Why do the Levites receive no land as an inheritance?

Deuteronomy 18:1–2: “The priests, who are Levites—indeed the whole tribe of Levi—are to have no allotment or inheritance with Israel. They shall live on the offerings made to the Lord by fire, for that is their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; the Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them.”

All of Israel’s priests came from the tribe of Levi, and all the chief priests were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. The other tribes are responsible for providing for them through their tithes (see Numbers 18). Rather than being given their own land, the Levites receive various towns and pasturelands interspersed throughout the other tribes (see Joshua 21).

This section of Joshua (chs. 13–21) is capped by the following conclusion.

Read: Joshua 21:43–45

⁴³ So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. ⁴⁴ The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵ Not one of all the Lord’s good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.

Question: What is the emphasis here?

“The Lord” is said four times in three verses here. The emphasis is not on all that Israel has achieved, but on how faithful God has been in keeping all the promises

he made to Israel, from Abraham to the time of Joshua, in giving them first the land and then rest in it.

Joshua 22:1–9

Joshua summons the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. These were the eastern tribes—they were the first to conquer the land of their inheritance, which they did under Moses. It was these tribes that Joshua summoned in chapter 1 and commanded them to fight with the other tribes until the entire nation had its inheritance. Now he is sending them home.

Read: Joshua 22:3–5

³ “For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your fellow Israelites but have carried out the mission the Lord your God gave you. ⁴ Now that the Lord your God has given them rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan. ⁵ But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Question: What are the ways Joshua tells the people they must be obedient to the Lord?

After this exhortation, Joshua blesses them and then dismisses them, commanding them to share the great wealth they have accumulated with their fellow Israelites.

Joshua 22:10–34

The rest of Joshua 22 concerns a peculiar altercation. The dismissed eastern tribes build an altar on the eastern side of the Jordan. When the rest of Israel hears about it, they get ready to go to war against them.

Why? The questions the Israelite delegation asks are telling: “How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? Was not the sin of Peor enough for us?”

What's going on here? "The sin of Peor" references Numbers 25, when some of the Israelites engaged in sexual immorality with pagans and bowed down to their gods. The priest Phinehas had an active role in stopping that sin epidemic, and he is the head of this expedition. The delegation also references the sin of Achan—stealing the devoted things—which resulted in death not only for Achan but for other Israelites.

Israel is concerned that the altar built by the eastern tribes is idolatrous—even if the tribes offer a sacrifice on it to Yahweh, the God of Israel, they would still be violating the law, because the altar is unsanctioned—sacrifices were to be made only at the Lord's sanctuary. Rather understandably, Phinehas's delegation wants to avoid another catastrophic judgment on the nation.

Fortunately, it seems no such idolatry is taking place. The eastern tribes explain that the altar is not for sacrifice, but as a witness, a memorial between the eastern tribes and the others, so that the correct worship of God and the unity of the tribes will be preserved. The eastern tribes name the altar "A Witness Between Us that the Lord is God" (v. 34).

Why the eastern tribes build "a replica of the Lord's altar" (v. 27), instead of a more customary stone monument, is something of a mystery. Perhaps the eastern tribes did have unsanctioned sacrifices in mind and backed down, or perhaps this was simply a case of bad judgment. In any case, their protestations are earnest, and to everyone's relief Phinehas's delegation is appeased by the explanation. The western tribes depart peacefully, having judged the eastern tribes to be faithful.

Discussion

Question: In Joshua 22, the Israelites are genuinely afraid of angering God—so much so that they are willing to start a civil war to prevent it.

- Why have we lost this fear of God?
- What should the "fear of God" mean to us?
- What things do we fear more than we fear God?

Question: In Joshua 22, the Israelites refuse to allow sin in the community of faith.

- What effects does allowed/unaddressed sin have on individuals in the church?
- What effects does it have on the church on a whole?
- What should our response be to the presence of sin among believers?

Lesson 8
Joshua's Farewell
Joshua 23–24

Last week: After years of war, God gives the elderly Joshua and the Israelites rest in the land, which is apportioned according to the commands God gave to Moses. The 700-year-old promise to Abraham has been fulfilled.

Joshua 23

Assuming Joshua is the same age as Caleb, about 25 years have passed since the distribution of the land to the tribes. Joshua is now elderly, 110 years old at this point, or close enough to it (Josh. 24:29). He has spent his entire life serving God and the nation of Israel, first as an aide to Moses and later as the leader himself. In all things, he has been faithful and obedient. Now he recognizes that the end of his life is near. He calls a national assembly of all the elders, leaders, judges, and officials from the tribes to give them his farewell address.

Read: Joshua 23:2–16

“I am very old. ³ You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you. ⁴ Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵ The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.

⁶ “Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. ⁷ Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. ⁸ But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.

⁹ “The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. ¹⁰ One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised. ¹¹ So be very careful to love the Lord your God.

¹² “But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, ¹³ then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you.

¹⁴ “Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. ¹⁵ But just as all the good things the Lord your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. ¹⁶ If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord’s anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.”

Question: What are the main points of Joshua’s speech?

Joshua begins by reminding the people that God has driven out the nations whose land they are now occupying, and that the Lord will likewise drive out the ones that remain.

There’s a rather severe caveat, however: God will only drive them out if the Israelites keep the law. If they fall into idolatry, God will no longer fight for Israel; instead, these foreign nations will be “snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land” (v. 13).

Joshua concludes by reminding the people again that God has kept all his promises to the people—this includes both the many blessings for faithful obedience and the harsh penalties for disobedience.

Joshua 24

Joshua’s final act of national significance is to renew the covenant, again with all the elders, leaders, judges, and officials. He begins by recapping Israel’s salvation history to this point: how Abraham left the pagan worship of his family and came to Canaan, how Moses and Aaron led the Israelites out of Egypt, how God defeated the Amorites and gave Israel their land under Moses, and, finally,

how God gave Israel the Promised Land as a blessing. This is all build-up to the following point, which contains Joshua's most famous quote:

Read: Joshua 24:14–15

¹⁴ “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵ But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

In response, the people pledge their allegiance to the Lord, making three vows to serve him. Joshua exhorts them again to be faithful to God and warns them that if they serve foreign gods, disaster will befall them.

Joshua dies and is buried “in the land of his inheritance,” in Ephraim (v. 30). The writer of the book of Joshua gives him this noble epitaph: “Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel” (v. 31).

As we have seen, Joshua lived one of the most unflawed, God-centered lives in the whole Bible. While he was, obviously, not perfect (he did get suckered into that bad treaty with the Gibeonites), we have no accounts of him sinning against God, doubting the Lord's command, or becoming angry with the people—all things that Moses, the most significant figure in the entire Old Testament, is recorded as having done.

Not only has Joshua successfully enforced faithful obedience to the Lord for an entire generation, his influence carries over to the next generation of leaders, who also oversee an era of faithfulness. If this doesn't seem like a particularly significant achievement, recall the numerous kings of Judah (including Solomon) who were themselves faithful (or, at least, mostly faithful) but who were unable to instill this faithfulness in their successors—their own sons (Solomon/Rehoboam; Jehoshaphat/Jehoram; Jotham/Ahaz; Hezekiah/Manasseh; Josiah/Jehoahaz; see 1 and 2 Kings).

Joshua's Legacy

Based purely on his obedience to God, Joshua is arguably the most faithful leader Israel ever had. The unwavering nature of the humble, God-centered faith he displays in everything is astonishing. Yet he remains one of the relatively unheralded figures of the Old Testament—even in the New Testament.

In the famous “heroes of faith” passage in Hebrews 11, for example, the writer gives an entire paragraph on Moses (“By faith Moses...”; vv. 24–28). Well and good; Moses is indisputably the most significant human figure in the Old Testament. But this is preceded by a salute to his parents (“By faith Moses’ parents...”; v. 23). Rahab, too, is mentioned by name (v. 31). But Joshua, this paragon of faithful obedience, gets only this line: “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days” (v. 30).

With no offense to the writer of Hebrews (for both he and his audience certainly had a much fuller appreciation of Joshua’s role in Israel’s history than we do), it is useful for us to remember that Joshua is far more than simply the man in charge of marching the Israelites around the walls of Jericho.

All things considered, Joshua could scarcely have left Israel with a better legacy. Israel has witnessed God working on their behalf, consistently over the course of many years, to give them the majority of the land they had been promised, and rest in it. If there was ever a time for Israel to embark on a golden age of God-given blessing, this would seem to be it. But as we know, this is not what happens. To the contrary, it’s mind-boggling how fast things go downhill.

Read Judges 2:10–15

¹⁰ After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹² They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord’s anger ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴ In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵ Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

The elders who succeeded Joshua—the people of the generation that conquered the Promised Land—carried on the national practice of serving the Lord, as they had promised in Joshua 24. But as soon as they are gone, Israel falls away, committing idolatry, the sin for which the Canaanites have just been punished so severely.

From this point on, Israel's history as given in the Bible is an incredibly frustrating cycle of **disobedience → punishment → repentance → deliverance**, first under the judges and later under the kings. It is a cycle that ultimately results in the destruction of Israel and the exile of the people from this land that God gave them.

Discussion

Question: What lessons can we learn from the book of Joshua?

-What does the book of Joshua teach us about God?

-What does it tell us about what our response to God should be?

Question: Joshua famously said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

-What does this look like for us as we seek to follow Christ?

Question: While the generation of Israelites that took the Promised Land was faithful their whole lives, as soon as they are gone, the people turn to idolatry.

-Why does this happen? (see Judges 2:10)

-How can we prevent this from happening with our own children?