



JOSHUA

WRITTEN BY: DOUG BECKER

EMERGENCE CHURCH

© 2020 Emergence Church LLC.
All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Writing & Research: Doug Becker

Editing Credits: Ryan Baitzel, Steve Hawthorne & Alex Houser

Art Credits: Creative direction by Matthew Novak Production Design: Liz Bernhardt

Photo Credits: Images used have been gathered from The US Library of Congress under fair use laws

Proofreading Credits: Donna Aust, Liz Bernhardt Kristin Gorter & James Hoogmoed



JOSHUA

AUTUMN 2020

DEAR EMERGENCE CHURCH,

Every fall, we as a church engage in a unified study of the Scriptures. This is always one of my favorite times of the year, as together we learn and take steps of faith around one vision to love, serve, and reach North Jersey for Christ.

I am especially excited this year as we tackle the book of Joshua, a rarely taught book of the Bible. Up to this point, the family of Israel has grown into a nation, and through Moses' leadership, God has redeemed them from slavery and given them the law. As we open to the book of Joshua, we see a new generation of the people of God, under a new leader, preparing to enter into God's Promised Land. This is an amazing book with some incredible truths, and I want to briefly share three of them with you:

COURAGE

One verse in the book of Joshua that brings Christians encouragement and comfort is found in chapter 1, verse 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." Throughout our study, we will see what true courage is, how to walk in it, and where to find its source. We will begin to see past the vague notions of the self-help courage that is so popular in modern slogans and tweets, and witness true courage grounded in an all-powerful foundation.

COMMUNITY

It is interesting that so many people, upon reading the book of Joshua, wrongly think it is solely about leadership, or solely about the type of individual that God uses. While it is true that Joshua is full of such lessons, what explodes off the pages is God's own desire to create and shape a people for his own glory. He wants us to know his love and to allow it to shape our entire lives. Throughout Joshua, we will learn from the people of God many lessons that can transfer to us as his church in our own time and place.

PROMISES FULFILLED

The book of Joshua contains the long-anticipated entrance for the people of God into the land of promise. We have seen the nation of Israel move through the wilderness, including the consequences they experienced as a result of compromise. Yet God is faithful to his promises. In the same way, the New Testament writers draw on themes of our own walk through the wilderness of this world, and the promise that we will enter heaven. However, unlike the generation of Joshua's day, our promised land is won completely by the one who had no compromises or failings—Jesus Christ.

This fall, I am glad that together we are studying through Joshua, a book that is not always easy, yet it is one that we can take courage from in community, as we walk on this side of heaven to the ultimate promised land won by Christ. My prayer is as a result of this study, your faith would experience the same strengthening that Paul prayed for the Christians in Colossians 1:9-14:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

RYAN BAITZEL,**LEAD PASTOR:**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	A
PROLOGUE: A COMMUNITY CALLED	7
A NEW GENERATION STEPS FORWARD	8
BELONGING	14
BY GOD'S STRENGTH	20
THE LORD'S BATTLE	26
FAILURE	31
TWO COVENANTS	37
SEEING GOD IN ALL THINGS	43
THE WORK TO BE DONE	49
WORSHIP AND JUSTICE	56
GOD'S GREAT WORKS	63
APPENDIX: JOSHUA'S WARS OF CONQUEST	70

ABBREVIATIONS

- AYB** ANCHOR YALE BIBLE
- AYBD** ANCHOR YALE BIBLE DICTIONARY. EDITED BY DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN. 6 VOLS. NEW YORK: DOUBLEDAY, 1992.
- BAR** BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY REVIEW
- BDAG** DANKER, FREDERICK W., WALTER BAUER, WILLIAM F. ARNDT, AND F. WILBUR GINGRICH. GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE. 3RD ED. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2000.
- DOTP** T. DESMOND ALEXANDER AND DAVID W. BAKER, DICTIONARY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: PENTATEUCH, ED. T. DESMOND ALEXANDER AND DAVID W. BAKER. DOWNERS GROVE: INTERVARSITY, 2003.
- HALOT** LUDWIG KOEHLER AND WALTER BAUMGARTNER, THE HEBREW AND ARAMAIC LEXICON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT. TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY M. E. J. RICHARDSON. 2 VOLS. LEIDEN: BRILL, 1994–2000.
- HDO** HANDBUCH DER ORIENTALISTIK/HANDBOOK OF ORIENTAL STUDIES
- JBL** JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE
- JPSTC** THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY TORAH COMMENTARY
- LHOTS** THE LIBRARY OF HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES
- NAC** NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY
- NICOT** NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE OLD TESTAMENT
- NIDOTTE** NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND EXEGESIS. EDITED BY WILLEM A. VANGEMEREN. 5 VOLS. GRAND RAPIDS: ZONDERVAN, 1997.
- TOTC** TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

PROLOGUE: A COMMUNITY CALLED

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. - 1 Peter 2:9–10

We all resonate with the wonderful gift of salvation from sin that Jesus offers to each and every one of us. No one is made right with God because of the community to which he or she belongs. We are his because he has worked in our hearts to bring conviction of sin, faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, and the hope of being raised with him to enjoy God forever. But salvation does not stop there, in the personal experience of the individual. Belonging to Christ means being part of a people, because Jesus came to earth to build his church, and that is who we are if we are his.

As we see in the Scripture above, penned by the apostle Peter, the church is a corporate body of believers, from many different places and backgrounds, joined together in the unity of our common calling. Peter is not presenting the church as something entirely new, but rather patterned after Old Testament Israel. He shows this by using familiar Old Testament passages in a fresh and striking way. It is the church that is a "chosen people" (Isaiah 43:20). Moreover, we are "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." This is exactly what God had purposed for Israel at the inauguration of their covenant in Exodus 19:5–6. And we, who are naturally rebels against God, had formerly "not received mercy," but because of his grace "have now received mercy," echoing the hope for Israel expressed centuries earlier by the prophet Hosea (Hos 1:6–2:23).

In Jesus, God's vision for what his people are transcends what was envisioned for Israel in the past. Although Israel's formal relationship with God was sealed in Exodus 19 at Mount Sinai, they had already been "a people" for centuries, sharing a common ancestry through their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church, by contrast, is composed of people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9)—individuals who have no genetic relationship or social obligation towards one another—having been brought together into a bond so close that we rightfully call one another "brother" and "sister." We, who were "not a people," have been made "God's people." We are a community called to be in loving fellowship with one another.

Our calling extends beyond fellowship into mission: "That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Our mission is to make known how precious Jesus is to a world that rejects God and misunderstands us. Through the cumulative effort of the church, the infinite value of Jesus will be made known, as we each perform the role that God has for us, together with one voice bearing witness to him and his power, evidenced in the love we have for the world and for one another. The church is a community of believers who make known to an unbelieving world what it means to know and worship the one true God.

This study of the book of Joshua addresses the important questions of how we, the church, can fulfill our sacred mission in a world that is opposed to us. Although the mission that Joshua's people were given, and the means by which they were to accomplish it, were drastically different than ours, we worship the same God they did, who delights to fight our battles and strengthens us to do what seems impossible. These stories have been handed down to us so that we can learn what it means to serve our holy God, as a community that he has called to shine the light of Christ in the midst of darkness.



CHAPTER 1:

A NEW GENERATION
STEPS FORWARD

TAKING UP THE MANTLE

The people of Israel gathered on the eastern shores of the Jordan River. Except for two very exceptional leaders, Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, the entire generation that had come out of Egypt forty years earlier had passed away in the wilderness as part of God's judgment on them for their unbelief and faithlessness. This new generation's task was to succeed where their parents had failed, by trusting the Lord during the most difficult and terrifying part of their journey yet. Centuries earlier, God promised to give the previous generation's descendants the land of Canaan. Now the time of fulfillment had come. He would give them this land. They would be his people, and he would be their God. Their part was to trust the Lord to do what seemed impossible.

Each generation of God's people must embody their role as a community called to do extraordinary things, unique to their time and place. We must decide what we will take from the legacy of those who have gone before us as we assume the responsibility to build God's kingdom. Behind us tower the examples of our predecessors' successes as well as their failures. Will we do the hard work of standing on the shoulders of those who remained faithful, or follow those who chose the easy path that leads to destruction?

Like us, the Israelites of Joshua's day did not lack bad examples. They had been raised among a people who were constantly grumbling and rebelling against the Lord and his appointed leaders. At times, their discontent got so severe that they desired to return to bondage in Egypt.^[1] But also like us, Joshua could look to a small number of godly men and women who lived lives worthy of imitation. In chapter one, God gives this choice to him. What kind of leader would he be, now that Moses is gone? Would he live by fear, or by obedient trust in God's words: "Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised Moses" (Josh 1:2-3).

TRUST FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

But how? Joshua was the head of a people fewer in number than the entrenched inhabitants of the land, many of whom lived in well-fortified cities,^[2] enjoyed the protection of experienced militaries, and were armed with iron weapons and chariots, all far superior to the makeshift implements possessed by Joshua's ragtag band of escaped slaves.^[3] Years earlier, the spies sent into the land by Moses came back utterly intimidated by what they saw there. Although reproved for their lack of faith, their report was accurate. "The people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. . . . and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."^[4] Clearly, the key to victory would not lie in Israelite strength or strategy, but in the Lord's ability to give them what he had promised.

Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan today, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard it said, "Who can stand before the sons of Anak?" Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly, as the LORD has promised you.^[5]

Footnotes:

^[1] Exodus 14:11-12; 17:3; Numbers 11:4; 14:1-1; 20:2-5; 21:4-5; Deuteronomy 1:27.

^[2] Deuteronomy 4:38; 7:1; 11:23.

^[3] Joshua 17:16-18; Judges 1:19; 4:3, 13.

^[4] Numbers 13:27, 33; Deuteronomy 1:28.

^[5] Deuteronomy 9:1-3.



Crossing the Jordan

The plate photo above shows the approximate location of where Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan River. Imagine the sight of the waters held back, as thousands of people, tired and scared, moved across on dry land with all their earthly possessions. This was one of the many ways God assured Israel that he was with them to the welcome them to the land promised to their forefathers.

To underscore this, God now makes Joshua the very same promise that he made to Moses when he called him to lead the Hebrews forty years earlier: “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you” (v. 5; see Exod 3:12). And just to let it sink in, he repeats this again in verse 9. As it was then, so it is now. God’s presence is the root of all our confidence, as we step out in faith to do what seems impossible to us. Whether we are proclaiming the gospel, making disciples, planting churches, raising children who love Jesus, feeding the hungry, or bringing hope to the hopeless, we are never alone. If we are faithful to him, God will be with us, doing what we, through our own effort, cannot. It is not without reason that Jesus concludes the Great Commission with the very same promise: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”^[6]

THE HEART THAT GOD USES

There are many places in the history of God’s dealings with mankind that can encourage us. Ever since the time of Jesus, the Lord’s work has been evident throughout the ages. In the early years the church experienced explosive growth despite several waves of state-sanctioned persecution. Over the next few centuries, early theologians developed ways to express the New Testament’s teachings about Jesus’ divinity in the face of multiple heresies. The gospel was reasserted and the Bible made available to the masses during the Protestant Reformation. Great revivals and awakenings swept across Europe and North America, with untold numbers coming to Christ. The worldwide slave trade which had existed since the dawn of human history was finally abolished through the efforts of Christian leaders in the British Empire. World missions underwent explosive growth beginning in the 1800s, and today churches are flourishing in non-Western lands and even in places of intense persecution. We could cite many more examples. But such victories are not automatic.

All these serve as reminders that God uses men and women with a holy passion for his glory to accomplish his purposes. Such people always share similar characteristics, several of which are highlighted here in chapter one. As God reveals what faithfulness looks like for Joshua, here are three marks of his godly character that we can model.

The first is a willingness to embrace the unique roles that God has given us. Moses’ job was to shepherd God’s people in the wilderness, although he himself was forbidden from entering the Promised Land and could only look upon it from afar.^[7] Equally as important, Moses was the one through whom God gave his Law to his people. And there are other examples of God assigning particular tasks to some of his people and not to others. The duties of caring for and transporting the tabernacle, for instance, were restricted to the Levites,^[8] and the priesthood was given to Aaron and his descendants alone.^[9] Joshua’s part, as the one to lead Israel into the land, was different from all of these, but just as essential, as was that of every single Israelite under his command.

Rather than obsessing over why God calls us to one thing instead of another, we should all consider the special ways he equips us for the unique work he has given us. This is echoed strongly in the way Paul describes the individuals who make up the church, each playing an important but unique role, just as the various parts of a physical body compose the whole. He writes, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”^[10]

Another important mark of people used by God is that they know his Word. This doesn’t mean that we all need to be biblical scholars, but we should all hunger to know him as he has revealed himself to us, allowing God’s thoughts to shape ours. The way we do this is by frequently and consistently reading the Scriptures.

It is interesting to note that although Joshua’s task is to lead the Israelites into battle, the primary way he is to prepare himself has nothing to do with military strategy. Rather, he is to learn God’s will through constant study of the Word.^[11]

^[6] Matthew 28:20.

^[7] Numbers 20:10–13; Deuteronomy 3:23–29.

^[8] Numbers 4.

^[9] Exodus 27:21; 29:9; Numbers 18:27. A refusal to accept this resulted in the disastrous rebellion led by Korah, Dathan, and On in Numbers 16.

^[10] Romans 12:4–6a.

^[11] God’s instructions for Israel’s future kings in Deuteronomy 17:14–20 are strikingly similar.

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh 1:7–8).

He must be careful to do all the law, turning neither to the right nor to the left. It is to be constantly in his mouth, as he meditates upon it. We find the same language in Psalm 1:2, where the man or woman of God “delights in the law of the LORD, and meditates on it,” as Joshua is to do also, “day and night.”^[12]

In the Bible, “meditation” is different than the concept of the same name that we find in Eastern religions. Rather than emptying one’s mind for one reason or another, or repeating a short utterance again and again, biblical meditation involves filling one’s mind with God’s Word, which includes reciting it out loud. When God tells Joshua, “This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth,” he appears to mean it quite literally. The Hebrew verb translated as “meditate” often refers to people actually speaking—it is what we do with our tongues,^[13] throats,^[14] and mouths.^[15] It even describes a lion “growling over his prey.”^[16] The godly one is portrayed here as one who is in love with Scripture, and not only reads it, but speaks it as well—even, and perhaps especially, to him- or herself.

A third mark of godly character displayed in Joshua 1 is commitment to the needs of all God’s people, not just our own immediate community circles. We see this in Joshua’s brief exchange with the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh in verses 12–18.^[17] In Numbers 32, these tribes requested that Moses give them land east of the Jordan River as their allotment, rather than an inheritance west of the river with the rest of their brethren. Moses’ initial response to this proposal was highly critical, until they clarified that they would join their fellow Israelites in taking possession of the Promised Land. Moses then instructed his successors, Joshua and Eleazar the priest, to make their inheritance in the Transjordan conditional on whether or not they fulfilled their promise. Here, Joshua reminds them of their vows, and they enthusiastically respond, “All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you, as he was with Moses!” (vv. 16–17)

It is the responsibility of those who dwell in security and blessing to fight for those who do not. The remaining tribes had many difficult years ahead of them, where their faith would be tested in a strange land in conflict with armies intent on destroying them. While the people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, on the other hand, dwelt comfortably in cities won years earlier, they would have been wrong to think that this exempted them from fighting alongside their brothers who were not yet sharing in the same rest.

Similarly, we who enjoy the blessings that are ours often simply because of our position—whether racial, economic, cultural, educational, or otherwise—must not forget that there will always be many others who do not enjoy the privileges we have, and need us to strive alongside them. It’s not that we are stronger or somehow better than them; if anything, the ease afforded to us by a comparatively comfortable life of faith tends to make us soft and dull. But as long as it is in our power, the Lord expects and commands us to use the wealth, power, and resources he has given to us to benefit those who do not enjoy the same worldly blessings we do, both in alleviating their suffering and in helping them to further the gospel in ways that only they can do.

In many ways, Joshua 1 sets the agenda for the rest of the book. Joshua will indeed do what God has called him to do. And time and time again God will demonstrate that it is his presence and favor that counts, not the strategic military capabilities of his people (if it were, they would have been doomed!). Their job is to remain true to the Lord, following his law, and selflessly coming alongside one another in the many battles that lie ahead.

^[12] The same verb is frequently accompanied by notes of long duration (e.g., “all day long”) in Psalms 35:28; 38:12; 63:6; 71:24.

^[13] Psalms 35:28; 37:30; 71:24; Isaiah 59:3.

^[14] Psalm 115:7. [15] Proverbs 8:7.

^[16] Isaiah 31:4.

^[17] Israel is composed of eleven full tribes and the two so-called half-tribes. This is because Joseph is treated as Jacob’s firstborn and receives a “double” portion of blessing, split between his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (see Genesis 48). Because of this, there is technically no tribe of Joseph, but rather two half-tribes. This way of counting, found throughout Joshua, retains the traditional language of “twelve tribes,” although technically there are thirteen of them (11 + 1/2 + 1/2).

CHAPTER 1 QUESTIONS

What challenges confront the church today that are the same as those faces by previous generations, and what are some that are different?

What are some negative examples left to us from previous generations, and what are some positive ones?

What difference does Jesus' promise to be with us make as we seek to be faithful to his mission?

Define the unique roles to which God has called you in the following areas:

Family: _____

Church: _____

Workplace: _____

Friendships: _____

World: _____

What are some practical, attainable steps that you can take to know God's word better than you do now?



CHAPTER 2:

BELONGING

THE NEED TO BELONG IS UNIVERSAL. From an early age, our behavior and attitudes are motivated by the opinions of our peers. We stare at our screens, craving the approval of friends and strangers alike on social media. Without even knowing it, our thoughts about life's important questions are shaped by groups whose acceptance we seek. Like so many things that get twisted by sin and confusion, this thirst for belonging comes from a very legitimate desire engraved on our hearts by our Creator. God made us communal beings who thrive in healthy relationships with one another. "It is not good for the man to be alone."^[1] And although our disordered desires corrupt this pure aspect of our nature, it can be redeemed by God. And the home that we find among his people now is a foretaste of the true fellowship and intimacy that will one day be fully restored, and more so, in the new heavens and the new earth.^[2]

All who find their rest in God are welcome in his family. Only here do we find the one who sees our faults, shame, and ugliness and answers back with incomprehensible love. We all stand as outsiders to this community, and we are welcomed in because he is good and never turns away anyone who truly seeks to come to him in the way he has provided.

This looks different depending on one's point in human history, not because God changes, but because his revelation to us was given in different phases. Those who lived in the time of Joshua came to know God through joining his chosen people. (This is the reason why the Law is so adamant that the Israelites were to love sojourners).^[3] Today, as we stand in the light of the cross, we are called to come to this same family of faith through Jesus, who opened the way for full forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another.

ALL ARE WELCOME

A common misconception about the Old Testament is that it made acceptance within the community of faith a matter of birthright. After all, Israel, as a nation, was united by common ancestry. The formation of a chosen people was grounded in promises given to Abraham and transmitted explicitly through his biological descendants.^[4] Israel itself was named after their infamous forefather, and the tribes are all named after his sons.

But when we scratch beneath the surface, we see that although genealogical descent was certainly a large component in God's plan to use Israel to counter the tragic effects of human evil, ever since the beginning there have been hints of a much wider purpose to incorporate all of humanity into God's story of redemption. The Lord's initial promise to Abraham culminates with the words, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."^[5] God reiterates this dimension of the covenant to both Isaac and to Jacob.^[6] Genesis 17, a chapter that places enormous emphasis on his descendants' role in the covenant, begins with God changing Abram's name to Abraham, with the explanation, "I have made you the father of many nations," a statement which Paul says is an open invitation to the Gentiles into the family of faith.^[7] Moreover, circumcision, the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, is extended to all who dwelt among his people, even the foreigner.^[8] Exodus 12:38 informs us that a "mixed multitude" left Egypt along with the Hebrews. Throughout the Old Testament, we see that several such "outsiders" rose to prominent positions within Israel, such as "Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite,"^[9] who was the only one of the previous generation, aside from Joshua himself, allowed to enter the Promised Land.^[10] Joshua 8:33 notes that "strangers" were

Footnotes:

^[1] Genesis 2:18.

^[2] Revelation 21:1–22:5.

^[3] Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 19:34; 24:22; Numbers 15:15–16; Deuteronomy 10:19.

^[4] Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:13, 18; 16:10; 17:7–12, 19; 22:18; 24:7; 26:3–5; 28:4, 13–14; 35:12; 48:4.

^[5] Genesis 12:3. Note how Paul says that in these words God "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" (Gal 3:8).

^[6] Genesis 26:4 and 28:14, respectively.

^[7] Romans 4:16–17.

^[8] Genesis 17:12–13.

^[8] Genesis 17:12–13.

^[9] Numbers 32:12; Joshua 14:6, 14.

^[10] Others would include Uriah the Hittite, whose home was located within eyeshot of King David's royal palace (2 Sam 11:2–3) and who was counted as one of David's most prominent warriors (23:39), as well as Ittai the Gittite (2 Sam 15:19; "Gittite" denotes a person from the Philistine city of Gath), whose very name in 2 Samuel is a pun on the Hebrew "with me" and signals his loyalty to David during his latter tumultuous years (although the actual meaning of his name may be either Hittite *attai* or Hurrian *attai*, both of which mean "father"; see David Toshio Tsumura, *The Second Book of Samuel* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019], 237).

present at the covenant renewal ceremony at Mount Ebal. And Deuteronomy 4:6–8 reveals that part of God’s purpose in giving the Law was indeed missional, to reach beyond Israel as a testimony to the nations:

Keep [these statutes] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

So we should not be surprised when we come to the book of Joshua and find that the very first story is of a Canaanite prostitute who is welcomed into the people of Israel, a foretaste of the worldwide hope voiced also in passages like Psalms 47:8–9 and 72:8.

Encamped at Shittim, a place rife with memories of the previous generation’s rebellion,^[11] Joshua’s first move is to send two spies across the Jordan to gather reconnaissance, with particular interest in the city of Jericho. While there, the spies lodge in the house of a woman named Rahab, the aforementioned prostitute, who hides them on her roof^[12]. When messengers from the king arrive at her home to apprehend the men, Rahab tells them that they are too late, and that the spies fled the city shortly before dark. Once they are gone, she sneaks up onto her roof and helps them escape the city, but not before instructing them where to hide so that their pursuers will not be able to find them.^[13]

In their conversation in verses 8–14, it becomes clear that Rahab helps them because of what she heard the Lord had done, both in delivering Israel from Egypt, and in establishing them in the lands across the Jordan. “As soon as we heard it,” she tells them, “our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath” (v. 11). These words reveal three crucial steps that bring us to a saving knowledge of God, through which we find belonging among his people.

RIGHT HEARING

The Scriptures are a testimony to God’s great works. These include his creation, his judgments against sin, his signs that confirm his truth, and especially his redemption of his people, both here in the Old Testament, but especially in Christ. When we hear of these things, we have a choice of whether to believe or to respond with cynical skepticism. Just as the Pharisees found ways to explain away Jesus’ signs,^[14] it would have been possible for Canaanites like Rahab to deny that the Lord was behind the stories surrounding Israel. Perhaps the Hebrews were just exceptionally skilled fighters who got lucky, or perhaps the gods of Egypt and Ammon were angry with their people and gave them into the hands of their inferiors. But Rahab approaches the stories with an open mind, finds them to be truthful, and responds appropriately with belief and godly fear, as if to say, “If the things I have heard are true, then I need to take God very seriously.”

CONFESSION

Proverbs 9:10 tells us, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Godly fear is not an end in itself, and should always lead us to action. Ironically, it is the one who fears God who does not need to fear him.^[15] If the sinner’s proper response to hearing of God is fear, then the proper response to that fear is a confession that is more than mere words, but an entire reordering of our worldview that orients our understanding of reality around his truth. The fear of God is the bridge between what we confess and how we live. Knowing what God is like leads us to see that honoring him is the greatest thing that we should care about, and this in turn leads to genuine godly change.

^[11] Numbers 25:1–3.

^[12] Despite the suggestions of some commentators, the text seems to purposely avoid language that would imply sexual relations with Rahab or other members of her household. See Richard S. Hess, *Joshua*, TOTC 6 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 91–2.

^[13] Excavations at Jericho show that rows of houses functioned as part of the city walls. This is true also of other excavated cities of Late Bronze Age Canaan as well—notably, Megiddo, Lachish, Tel Batash, and Tell Beit Mirsim. Ancient Jericho is located at the site today known as Tell es-Sultan (Ze’ev Herzog, “Cities: Cities in the Levant,” AYBD, 1037).

^[14] Matthew 12:24; 23:11–15.

^[15] For example, Exodus 20:20.

Life looks drastically different when we confess, alongside Rahab, that “the LORD is God in heavens above and on the earth beneath.” This statement, in fact, is lifted verbatim from an incredible sermon Moses gave to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4, in which he lays out a roadmap back to the Lord, understanding that his people will inevitably slide into idolatry. And so, Moses embeds this confession among strong statements of monotheism, the futility of worshiping false gods, and the great love that the Lord has for his people. How appropriate such truths are for Rahab, and for us, when we turn from worthless idols to serve the living and true God!

REPENTANCE

But how do we know that we are not just blowing smoke when we confess these things? Only when there is visible evidence in our lives. This is because our actions are driven by what is in our hearts. For Rahab, this means putting herself at great personal risk in order to help the Israelite spies. Her actions show, not only how convinced she is regarding the reports of Israel’s God, but also that the “God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath” would be merciful to her if she turned from her false gods and to find refuge in him. She understood that the God to whom she was turning was both powerful and exceedingly good.

In Galatians 3:2, Paul reminds us that we are accepted into God’s family “by hearing with faith.” Rahab stands out as a model of this. Even though she is a foreigner, engaged in a profession that profaned her according to God’s law,^[16] belonging to a people about to fall under God’s judgment, she casts herself on his grace and is welcomed among his people because of it. During the account of the battle of Jericho later on in the book, the author makes special note of this: “She has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.”^[17]

There is no doubt that the book of Joshua contains a very sobering portrayal of God’s judgment against sin. And yet, here, at the outset, we see a tremendous picture of his mercy towards those who turn to him in faith. No one is doomed by fate. If we are far from him, it is owing to our own hardness of heart. This is as true for us today as it was for those who lived in the time of Joshua. In God’s house, there is a door of belonging open to everyone who hears with faith, confesses God’s truth, and turns to him with their whole heart and life.

“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”^[18]

^[16] Leviticus 19:29.

^[17] Joshua 65:25

^[18] Revelation 22:17.

CHAPTER 2 QUESTIONS

When was a time when you were excluded from a group whose acceptance you desired? Why did that happen? In what ways does being welcomed into God's family put that experience into perspective?

Why do so many people struggle with feeling accepted among the people of God, and what can you do to welcome people in the name of Jesus'?

RIGHT HEARING

What are some of the different ways we receive true testimony about God? Rank them numerically according to how often you learn from them (1 being most often).

What can you do to increase your exposure to God's truth?

Has there ever been a truth about God that you have found hard to accept? How has God led you on that aspect of your faith journey?

CHAPTER 3:

BY GOD'S

STRENGTH



JOSHUA 3:1-5:12

IN EVERY GENERATION, God's people are tasked with the impossible, whether it be the ancient Israelites conquering a land of mighty kingdoms, or modern Christians commanded to love our enemies and to reach the spiritually dead with the life-giving truth of the gospel of Christ. There is simply no way that we can accomplish the work that God has for us if we rely only on our own resources. But what does it look like to truly rely on the Lord, and how does doing something by his strength become more than a mere cliché and turn into a lived reality?

The entry of Israel into the land under Joshua's leadership provides us with a blueprint of what it means to rely on the Lord. As Israel gets ready to do battle in the land of Canaan, the text is strangely silent about any military training or preparations. There is no inventory of weaponry, no drilling of soldiers, and no tactical planning. And in the following chapters, as we see the battles unfolding, we find that the essential strategies are those that demonstrate Israel's devotion to and dependence on the Lord, such as their ritual march around Jericho, or the importance placed on the people's integrity leading up to the defeat of Ai. Their success or defeat depended, above all else, on whether or not God was with them.

A word of caution: The absence of any mention of military preparation does not mean that there wasn't any. Suggesting otherwise would be akin to concluding that the apostles didn't spend time studying the Bible simply because we aren't told of their Scripture reading habits. The call to rely on God's strength does not imply that his people are exempted from planning, training, and other forms of wise preparation. Just as David learned to sling stones defending his father's sheep from predators^[1] and Paul gained his masterful command of the Hebrew Scriptures training under Rabbi Gamaliel,^[2] so we must sharpen ourselves to be useful in our Master's quiver. Equipping ourselves and trusting God are not mutually exclusive disciplines; both are necessary, like the two blades on a pair of scissors. As Jesus twice fed the multitudes with meager amounts of bread and fish, so God, in his sovereign power, uses and multiplies the earnest efforts of his faithful people. Consider how Paul describes his own ministry, comparing himself to the other apostles: "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."^[3]

The account of Israel's entry into the land highlights two important components that must be in place if we are to rely on his strength as we strive to do his will: Honoring his holiness and acknowledging him as our true power.

HONORING GOD'S HOLINESS

Holiness is notoriously difficult to define, because it is a characteristic that is exclusive to God. Created things are holy only insofar as they have been made holy by him and belong to him. God's holiness refers, quite literally, to his godness—separateness from and superiority over all other things. As Anselm famously said, God is "the being than which nothing greater can be conceived."^[4] Do we treat him this way? To proclaim God as holy is to proclaim him as God, and ascribing holiness to him is among the highest forms of verbal praise.^[5] God's moral qualities of righteousness, goodness, and love are dimensions of his holiness, and are also expected of all who call upon his name. The summary of his commandments for his people reflects this: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."^[6]

Footnotes:

^[1] First Samuel 17:34–37.

^[2] Acts 22:3.

^[3] First Corinthians 5:10. For a balanced and accessible evaluation of "let go and let God" theology, and the movement that spawned it, see Andrew D. Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came From, What It Is, and Why It's Harmful* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press: 2017).

^[4] This classic formulation is from chapter two of Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion*.

^[5] Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 99:9; Revelation 4:8.

^[6] Leviticus 19:2; 20:26; Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 7:34; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15–16.



Gilgal

In Hebrew, the word *gilgāl* simply means "circle," probably signifying a ring of stones. Interestingly, with the exception of its naming here in Joshua 5:9, it is always called *haggilgāl*, "the circle." Although the location is unknown, this fortified encampment would have been located somewhere in the vicinity of Jericho and the fords of the Jordan, and was different than the Gilgal from the stories of Elijah and Elisha, which is also mentioned by Hosea and Amos. Several archaeological sites have been proposed for the location of Joshua's Gilgal, but none are certain.

The concern to honor God's holiness over three thousand years ago in ancient Israel can make certain aspects of the Old Testament seem very strange to us. These include elaborate instructions for establishing, maintaining, and conducting the priesthood, laws regarding purity and impurity, gestures like covering one's face or removing one's sandals, and harsh consequences for transgressing holy boundaries, such as touching Mount Sinai or the ark of the covenant.¹⁷¹ All these provisions were necessary, however, if God, who is holy, was to dwell in the midst of Israel, in a time and place long before Christ's blood made full atonement for the sins of his people. We must always remember that, in both Testaments, there is a "healthy balance" maintained between God's "close, comforting presence and his awesome, fearsome glory."¹⁸¹

We can see here several examples of the care Israel's leadership took in order to respect God as holy. The ark of the covenant, which symbolized God's throne,¹⁸¹ leads the way across the Jordan, carried by the Levitical priests. But the people are commanded to maintain a distance of 2,000 cubits from it, roughly ten football fields (Josh 3:3–4).¹⁸¹ In addition, the people are to consecrate themselves (v. 5), which would have involved ritual washing, avoiding sexual relations, and other sources on impurity.¹⁸¹ Once over the Jordan, all the male Israelites are circumcised, which was an absolute requirement for them to participate in the Abrahamic covenant.¹²²¹ The fact that this had not been done in the wilderness contrasts their commitment to the Lord against the previous generation's disregard for him. Finally, the nation keeps the Passover,¹⁸³¹ in obedience to God's word concerning their entry into the land.¹⁸⁴¹ At this point, the manna ceases and the people begin to enjoy the produce of the Promised Land. These were some of the ways Joshua's generation honored God's holiness.

Today, personal holiness is also expressed through our conduct.¹⁸⁵¹ The blood of Christ has made holy all who trust him.¹⁸⁶¹ This is what the New Testament writers mean by calling all Christians "saints."¹⁸⁷¹ God then calls us to live lives worthy of our "holy calling."¹⁸⁸¹ We do this by refusing to conform to the sinful age in which we live, having minds instead transformed by constant renewal in God's Word.¹⁸⁹¹ We avoid the things that we know defile our bodies and spirits,¹²⁰¹ which includes the mistreatment of others¹²¹¹ and especially abstaining from sexual immorality.¹²²¹ Rather, we practice self-control,¹²³¹ aiming to uphold Christ as holy in our hearts.¹²⁴¹ In other words, the way we honor God as holy, according to the New Testament, is not by participating in rituals and outward gestures of religious devotion that have the mere appearance of godliness (even good ones, like public prayer, singing, or taking communion). Rather, we live in a way that is consistent with the spiritual reality of having been changed in the deepest parts of our being by power of the Spirit of God. Holiness is the most important thing for anyone who

¹⁷¹ Exodus 19:12–13; 2 Samuel 6:5–9.

¹⁸¹ David M. Howard Jr., *Joshua* NAC 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 122.

¹⁸¹ Several passages speak of the Lord "enthroned on the cherubim," which is a reference to the ark as his throne (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; 1 Chr 13:6; Pss 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:36).

¹⁸¹ A cubit is roughly 50 cm. Not allowing the people to see the ark was part of the common procedure used to transport it, where, for example, it was covered with three layers of fabrics, which would have been wrapped around it several times. See Numbers 4:5–6.

¹⁸¹ Exodus 19:10, 15. The command in verse 15, "Do not go near a woman," is a temporary prohibition against sex, not a disparaging of women as somehow especially unclean. It is the nature of biblical language that commands applicable to both sexes were worded directly towards males. For example, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" does not imply that females are free to covet their neighbors' husbands. See also Numbers 11:18 and 1 Samuel 21:4–5.

¹²¹ Genesis 17:9–14; Exodus 4:24–26. The command to do this "a second time" (Josh 5:2) is curious. It has been suggested that the Israelites had only undergone the Egyptian method, in which the foreskin was not entirely removed (Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 [1966]: 474).

¹⁸³¹ Exodus 12:43–49.

¹⁸⁴¹ Exodus 13:5.

¹⁸⁵¹ First Peter 1:15–16; 2 Peter 3:11.

¹⁸⁶¹ First Corinthians 3:17; Ephesians 1:4; 4:24; 5:27; Colossians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; Hebrews 10:19.

¹⁸⁷¹ The Greek term *hagios*, translated "saint," simply means "holy one," someone who is "dedicated or consecrated to the service of God" (BDAG, 10–11). The same is true of the less frequent Hebrew term *qādōš*, although English translations also use "saint" in the Old Testament to translate *hāsīd*, which simply means "pious."

¹⁸⁸¹ Second Timothy 1:9.

¹⁸⁹¹ Romans 12:1–2.

¹²⁰¹ First Corinthians 7:34; 2 Corinthians 7:1.

¹²¹¹ First Thessalonians 2:10.

¹²²¹ First Thessalonians 4:1–3.

¹²³¹ First Timothy 2:15; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 3:4.

¹²⁴¹ First Peter 3:15.

desires to serve the Lord. “Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.”^[251]

REMEMBERING GOD'S POWER

Our confidence to do the work that God has for us comes from our knowledge of what he has already done for our good, attested both in the Scriptures and in our own lives. This can be challenging because we tend to remember the bad and forget the good—something particularly true in our culture, where single significant missteps get people “cancelled” and tarnish reputations seemingly forever. This also extends to the way we often think about God. The hard things he does or allows become dark clouds in our memories that cause us to question his goodness, his power, or both. One way we can guard against this is to take purposeful steps to remember the many ways he manifests his goodness towards us.

In Joshua 3 and 4, we see the Israelites doing the work of remembering as they cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan. Rather than entering through normal land route, God holds back the waters of the river in a scene intentionally reminiscent of their deliverance from Egypt.^[261] It is as if God is saying, “As I protected you then, so I am with you now.” Then, the Lord commands Joshua to have a representative from each tribe remove a stone from the riverbed, and to set them up at Gilgal as a memorial of God’s power and presence with Israel. Twice in chapter 4, we read that these stones are to serve as a reminder, not just to the present generation, but to future ones to come, of how the Lord allowed his people to pass through the Jordan on dry land, welcoming them into the Promised Land (vv. 6–7, 21–24). Gilgal functioned as something of a home base for the Israelites throughout the events narrated in Joshua. Every time they set out and every time they returned, they would have seen this monument and been reminded of who it was who fights for and through his people.

A fitting application in our own lives would be to practice ways of remembering the many ways, both big and small, that God shows us his power and love. And so, as we move forward with a mission so challenging that we cannot do it apart from his strength, we can be reminded, in our own memorials, of Jesus’ abiding promise to be with us, even to the end of the age.^[271] The words that served as strength and comfort to Joshua are relevant also to us: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you” (Josh 3:7; also 4:14).^[281]

^[251] Second Timothy 2:21.

^[261] This is more than the river merely drying up. The text says that the waters “stood and rose up in a heap” (Josh 3:16). This is a direct echo of Exodus 15:8, which recounts the parting of the Sea of Reeds: “the floods stood up in a heap.” “Sea of Reeds” is the correct translation of the Hebrew *yām sūp*, in contrast to the traditional, but incorrect and misleading “Red Sea.”

^[271] Matthew 28:18–19.

^[281] This theme was also present in 1:5, 9, 17.

CHAPTER 3 QUESTIONS

Have you ever found yourself doing something God requires of you, but through your own strength, rather than his?

How do you honor God as holy in your life?

When we read about the measures people had to go through in order to “consecrate themselves,” we are impressed with the degree to which honoring God as holy involved inconvenience. In what ways have you lost sight of this in your life?

In the chapter, we noted that, for the Christian, holiness is expressed in our moral conduct, and we contrasted that with outward expressions of ritual devotion, which are not wrong per se, but turn into mere “motions” when not coupled with truly transformed lives. Why is it so tempting to let religious ritual take the place of true holiness?

Name three areas in which you are failing to honor God as holy.

How do you think God wants you to change this?



JOSHUA 5:13-6:27

CHAPTER 4:

THE LORD'S BATTLE

IN CHAPTER THREE, we learned that the community of God's people who seek to rely on his strength must honor him as holy and lay hold of the confidence that comes from remembering his power and goodness. In this chapter, we see an example of that power, given as a testimony to future generations who are called to trust in him.

REAL HELP FOR THE FIGHT

Before he reaches Jericho, Joshua, presumably with his company behind him, is confronted by a mysterious "man" with a drawn sword. In a brief exchange, Joshua asks him two very reasonable questions, both of which are given enigmatic non-answers that reveal important truths about what is about to take place.

Joshua first asks him for whom he fights—Israel, or their enemies? But the man refuses to choose, and instead answers, "No, but I am the commander of the army of the LORD" (v. 14). His allegiance is to God alone. As we saw with Rahab and will see with Achan in chapter 7, none of us has dibs on either God's mercy or his judgment. It is the one who fears the Lord who finds help in the day of trouble.

The very mention of "the army of the LORD," and of its commander with his sword drawn (i.e., ready to fight), reveals that there is a spiritual dimension to the very physical conflict that is about to ensue. Much like Jacob's vision at Bethel, where he saw angels of God ascending and descending from heaven,^[1] we are reminded that there is an unseen spiritual dimension to all of our struggles. This is why we need the "whole armor of God," as Paul calls it in Ephesians 6, "for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."^[2] It is the "army of the Lord"—the host of powerful spiritual beings at God's command—that will ensure Israel's victory. But this victory will only be theirs if they remain faithful to him.

At this, Joshua falls to the ground, prostrates himself, and asks his second question, "What does my lord say to his servant?" (v. 14) In a way that echoes God's instructions to Moses at the burning bush, the commander answers him, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy" (v. 15).^[3] Indeed, this is strange advice for one who is going into battle. But as we observed in lesson three, if we love God and desire to serve him, then we must acknowledge the spiritual reality behind life's challenges and realize that our first very practical responsibility is to honor God's holiness. As Jesus tells us, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."^[4] If we do this, then we can trust him to take care of the rest.

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

From beginning to end, the entire account of the battle of Jericho makes it very clear that God is the one who achieves the victory for his people. God speaks as if it has already been won, even before he gives Joshua any instructions: "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor" (Josh 6:2). God's presence is the only real decisive factor in how things will turn out, and those who are faithful to him can trust that he will fight their battles for them.

Footnotes:

^[1] Genesis 28:10–17.

^[2] Ephesians 6:12.

^[3] see Exodus 3:5. Both here and in Exodus, it is unclear why removing one's shoes is seen as an appropriate response to holiness. Victor P. Hamilton makes four suggestions: Sandals were made of animal skins and so were unclean; there is no need to protect one's feet in God's presence; it is a sign of respect, similar to what we find in Muslim mosques today; God, as host, is welcoming a guest into his presence (Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 49).

^[4] Matthew 6:33.



Jericho

The remains of Jericho are located at the archaeological site of Tel es-Sultân, roughly about eight miles north of the Dead Sea. In Joshua's time, the city was only six acres in size, but was valued for its nearby oasis that provided water for settlers at the site as early as 9,000 BC, and for its strategic location at the juncture of several major roads. Control of Jericho would have given Israel access to the highlands located to the west and to territories further north.

Then Joshua is given the instructions. Israel's men of war are to march around the city once a day for six days, along with the ark, preceded by seven priests each blowing rams' horns. Then, on the seventh day, they are to do this seven times, followed by a long blast of the horns, at which point the Israelite forces are to shout in unison, which will cause the walls to fall, leaving the city undefended (vv. 3–5). This procedure, with the priests and the ark at the center of the military retinue, and the emphasis on doing things seven times,^[5] is more of a ceremonial ritual than a strategy for war, and would have sounded as strange then as it sounds today.^[6] Nevertheless, Joshua is meticulous about doing exactly as the Lord commanded, making sure that the only sound coming from the Israelite forces is the blowing of the horns.

WHAT FEAR OF THE LORD LOOKS LIKE

During the foreboding six-day prelude, Jericho is eerily silent, as it was when Israel first approached. “None went out, and none came in” (v. 1). As we have already seen, the inhabitants of Jericho were given every opportunity to turn to the Lord, but none took it, save for the one woman and her family waiting in their house with a scarlet cord hanging from the window.^[7] Instead, Jericho's king, his warriors, and his people opt to trust in their walls and their carved idols to deliver them from the judgment of the living God. The futility of this should have been obvious to those whose hearts had already melted at the reports of what the Lord had done to mighty Egypt and to the Amorite kings beyond the river.^[8] Nevertheless, it is not surprising to us today, as we give our lives to proclaiming the gospel of God's grace in Jesus to a culture that still celebrates sin, mocking the thought of God's judgment with caricatures of little red horned men and songs that cynically glorify hell as the final destination of those who are truly cool.

Before the final march on the seventh day, Joshua prepares his people for what is about to happen, reminding them to respect the Lord's instructions, that everything within the city, except Rahab and her household, is to be destroyed. Anything of silver, gold, bronze, or iron is to be regarded as holy and placed in the treasury of the Lord. This comes with the warning, “Lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it” (Josh 6:18; cf. 7:12).^[9]

The people's obedience to God is so meticulous that the actual assault on Jericho is almost anticlimactic. The people shout, the horns are blown, the walls fall. Then, the city is taken and its inhabitants are put to the sword. What took twenty verses to set up is over in two. Archaeological remains at Jericho (Tell es-Sultân) bear witness to the swift destruction of the city.^[10] As a result of what happened there, chapter 6 concludes, “So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land” (v. 26).^[11] God's judgment against this first Canaanite stronghold is thorough and decisive, and should have served as ample warning to the other cities of the land that they needed to repent or flee. As we will see, some did, but many did not.

This is a striking account for a variety of reasons. The idea that God would command Israel to wipe out an entire city is not easy thing to accept, and giving this the treatment it deserves demands more than we can do here.^[12] But we cannot think accurately about the events described in the book of Joshua unless we are prepared to acknowledge what the inhabitants of Jericho failed to take seriously—that the one true God, who both gives and takes all human life, also judges sin. Moreover, this very same God rescues any- and everyone who turns to him in faith and repentance, and he does so at the cost of the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. God does not issue empty threats, and, just like those who died on that day, he does not leave us without reason to believe in both his hatred for sin, and his love for fallen humanity.

^[5] It may be significant that the number seven is written fourteen times in the account of Jericho's fall. This count includes both cardinal and ordinal numbers.

^[6] Hess notes that there is nothing like this in any surviving account of ancient Near Eastern warfare, even though rituals were common before military conflicts (142).

^[7] Joshua 2:18.

^[8] Joshua 2:8–11.

^[9] Everything must be devoted to destruction; and if they violate this command, Israel herself will become as Jericho—devoted to destruction.

^[10] The dating of the remaining layers of the city has been a point of controversy for the last century, especially owing to erosion that has taken place in its Late Bronze Age stratum. Nevertheless, there is significant congruity between the biblical account and the material remains discovered there, which include collapsed walls, indications of burning, and, interestingly, a large amount of grain that confirms the burning took place in the spring (around the time of Passover, cf. Josh 5:10–12). It is also telling that, for some reason, the conquerors did not take the food stored in the city. Presumably, this was because they were prohibited by the Lord from doing so. For a good summary of the scholarly debate surrounding the archaeology of Jericho, see Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 2d. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 232–35.

^[11] Grammatically, “his fame” can refer to either the Lord's or Joshua's, and this same Hebrew word (*šōma* ^š) is used in similar contexts of both the fearful reputation of Israel (Deut 2:25) and of the Lord (Josh 9:9).

^[12] For a more thorough discussion of this important issue, see the appendix in this book, “Joshua's Wars of Conquest.”

CHAPTER 4 QUESTIONS

Recall that the commander of the army of the Lord refuses to side either with Israel or with her enemies. No one is guaranteed God's favor. We have it only if we come to him in the obedience of repentance and trust in Christ. Was there ever a time when you presumed to have God's favor, but later learned that you did not have it?

In this lesson, we learned that "there is an unseen spiritual dimension to all of our struggles." In which area of your life are you prone to forget this?

Why do we tend to neglect the spiritual aspect of our struggles, and how can we be more mindful of it?

The people of Jericho demonstrate an astonishing stubbornness to turn from their sinful way of life to enter into a loving relationship with God. How have you seen this same stubbornness in your own life? How have you seen it in the lives of others?

Why does the reality of God's judgment so often fail to compel sinful human hearts to turn in repentance and faith? Are we any less accountable because this is hard for us to do?

What are some common reasons people refuse to recognize God's hatred of sin and embrace the incredible love he has shown to us in Jesus?



JOSHUA 7:1-8:35

CHAPTER 5:

FAILURE

AFTER THEIR FIRST VICTORY, the Israelite army sets its sights on the city of Ai, located further west of Jericho in the vicinity of Bethel.¹¹¹ As with Jericho, Joshua first sends out spies, who return with a confident report, and the recommendation that a mere “two or three thousand” should be sufficient to mount a successful assault on the city.¹¹² Joshua confidently takes their advice, but to everyone’s surprise, the Israelites are repelled and thirty-six are killed in the attempt, prompting great mourning and lamentation among the people.

In response to Joshua’s prayer,¹¹³ God reveals that among the people there is someone who violated the command to devote everything in Jericho to the Lord and has kept for himself some of what should have been placed in the sacred treasury. God has already made it clear that such a violation of anything devoted to him would result in the offender (or offending group) becoming themselves devoted to destruction (6:18). Once again, the people must consecrate themselves (cf. 3:5), and on the following day the Lord will reveal, first by tribe, then by clan, then by household, who it is who has broken faith with him.¹¹⁴ He makes it clear what is to be done: “He who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel” (v. 15).

The next day, it is revealed that the one who committed this wrong is a man named Achan, of the tribe of Judah. Joshua confronts him, urging him to confess. Achan reveals that, during the battle of Jericho, instead of honoring God as holy and observing the prohibition against seizing the plunder, he secretly kept several valuable items: “a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels” (v. 21).¹¹⁵ Specifically, he says he “coveted them.” One is reminded, of course, of the tenth commandment,¹¹⁶ only instead of coveting what was his neighbor’s, Achan has coveted what was supposed to belong to the Lord. The items are brought to Joshua. Then Achan, along with everything in his household, including, sadly, his family members and their animals, are killed and burned. Then, a heap of stones is erected as a memorial over their remains, grimly corresponding to the memorial of God’s presence with his people that now stood at Gilgal.¹¹⁷ This harsh action shows that Achan’s household was to be treated the same way as the cities of Canaan, since, for the sake of riches, he had stepped out of the protective shadow of God’s love and mercy and had chosen to identify with those who were under God’s judgment. As long as he remained part of Israel, the entire nation was devoted to destruction. By separating Achan and everything associated with him, the nation disassociated itself with his treachery and stepped back into God’s protection.

Footnotes:

¹¹¹ While most archaeologists are fairly certain that Bethel is to be identified with the current village of Beitin, the location of Ai is much less certain. A popular choice is et-Tell, but other proposals include Khirbet Nisya and Khirbet el-Maqatir. Barry J. Beitzel (The New Moody Atlas of the Bible [Chicago: Moody, 2009], 117) suggests that Ai may have been a military outpost of the more prominent city Bethel. On Bethel, see Anson F. Rainey and R. Stephen Notley, The Sacred Bridge: Carta’s Atlas of the Biblical World (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 116–18. On Ai, see Provan, Long, and Longman, 236–39 and Hess, 157–59.

¹¹² Verses 3–4 is a commonly cited passage in the debate over the meaning of the term translated “thousand” throughout the Old Testament (Heb. *’elep*). The issue here is that the death of 36 troops (v. 5) would be a loss of less than 1.5 percent of three thousand, and this seems unlikely to be the cause of the great fear and mourning in verses 6 and 7 (James K. Hoffmeier, Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 156). One common solution is to regard an *’elep*, in many, though not all, passages to be a “social grouping that is smaller than the tribe but larger than the ‘father’s house’” (Philip P. Jenson, “לָאֵלֶּפֶת,” NIDOTTE 1.416). The term is almost certainly used this way in Judges 6:15. Space does not permit for us to analyze the pros and cons of the various positions here, only to note that there are good reasons to think that the number of Israelites who were initially sent against Ai may have been much lower than three thousand. This is significant because it potentially informs our understanding of how many Israelites left Egypt, a point of contention between the biblical testimony and archaeological estimates of the populations in various regions of the ancient Near East during the Late Bronze/Early Iron Ages.

¹¹³ This prayer has elements in it reminiscent of both the previous generation’s grumbling (Exod 14:11–12; 16:3; 17:3; Num 11:4–6; 14:2–3; 20:3–5; 21:5), as well as Moses’ intercession on their behalf (Exod 32:12; Num 14:13–19).

¹¹⁴ In uncharacteristic fashion, the ESV inserts the means by which it is assumed that the Lord revealed the offender—that he was to be taken “by lot” (cf. Judg 20:9; Jon 1:7). The Hebrew simply says that he will be “taken” or “caught” (Heb. *lakad*). It is more likely that this would have been done by Eleazar the high priest by means of the Urim and the Thummim, as prescribed specifically for use by Joshua in Numbers 27:21. These were stones that were held in the high priest’s breastpiece and used to discern God’s will in exceptional circumstances, since (all?) other forms of divination were forbidden in Israel, with a strong emphasis instead on prophecy (Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:10–12). Though it is impossible to discern exactly how these functioned, 1 Samuel 14:41 gives some clues. For a helpful brief discussion, see Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 612–13.

¹¹⁵ A shekel was just over ten grams. These items could have been concealed and moved easily.

¹¹⁶ Exodus 20:17.

¹¹⁷ Joshua 4:19–24.

The inclusion of Achan's household as accountable along with him parallels the salvation of Rahab's entire household, inviting further comparison between these two events. The outsider who fears the Lord finds salvation and is welcome among God's people, while the insider who refuses to fear him falls under God's judgment. It also reveals his family's complicity in his sin. The items Achan stole could not have been hidden in his tent without his family's knowledge, and none of them came forward to reveal what he had done. Instead, thirty-six Israelite soldiers had to die in order for it to become known, and had God not revealed both Achan's sin and his identity, Israel would have remained under God's curse.^[81]

In order to make sense of this frightening scenario, as well as many of the ethically confusing and disturbing things described in the book of Joshua, we must allow the Bible to speak for itself, defining reality along the lines of what it has already said—that the world is created by God, that human beings are accountable to him above all else, and that he has revealed himself by speaking and acting, in clear and unambiguous ways, in history, and that he has the right to judge human sin.^[91] Any question or criticism that does not assume these key truths, even if only for the sake of argument, is not an attempt to grapple seriously with the biblical text, but is rather directed at or against a distorted version of the Bible that has been arbitrarily neutered, purposely or not, by the questioner or the critic. However, if we are willing to hear the Bible on its own terms, we find that Israel, in Joshua's day, had massive reasons to believe that God issued the commands in the Law of Moses. Those reasons include both the visible and audible manifestation of the divine presence at Mount Sinai and the many miraculous signs done in Egypt and then in the wilderness. In fact, the very point of some important events that took place during this time was to demonstrate unambiguously that God spoke directly to Moses, and that the revelation that came through him was to be regarded as the direct word of God.^[101] Moreover, the authority of Moses had been passed on publicly to Joshua.^[111] And now the events unfolding in the book of Joshua would have served as unassailable evidence to everyone involved—both Israelite and Canaanite—that God was indeed behind what was being done. Achan would have been part of the force that marched against Jericho, disobeying a direct command from God, within a city whose walls had just been felled by nothing but the sheer power of God, after having crossed into the land on dry ground as the waters of the Jordan River stood up to let him and his people pass through. This was not an act of ignorance; it was high-handed disobedience to a God whose existence, directives, and holiness were clearly known.

LESSONS FROM ACHAN'S FATE

In Luke 13, Jesus is questioned about a tragedy that happened in his time, when Pontius Pilate killed a number of Galileans who had gone to the temple to worship.^[121] To this, Jesus adds an additional calamity for consideration, the collapse of the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem which killed eighteen people. Jesus doesn't offer an explanation as to why God would let such things happen. Rather, he directs our attention to two things. First, none of those who perished on those occasions died because they were worse sinners than the rest of us. And second, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."^[131]

Key to placing the Achan debacle in its proper biblical context is an understanding that all sin eventually brings death.^[141] Neither he, nor the Canaanites, received a fate different from the rest of mankind. The difference is that theirs is connected to a specific act of God—the possession of the Promised Land—whereas most other deaths occur within the context of everyday life, with little Scriptural insight as to why God chooses the days and hours he does. Because of this, when we read the account detailed in Joshua 7, we are not looking merely at the tragic demise of someone who refused to fear the Lord, we are looking at ourselves, for we all have taken what is God's, despite God's goodness to us and his clear instructions of what he expects of us. Even without all our questions answered, God's message to each and every one of us is clear: unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

^[81] A pop-culture parallel may help to illustrate this point. In the classic television show, *The Sopranos*, Carmela Soprano is the wife of mob boss Tony Soprano. A consistent theme surrounding Carmela's character is the question of her own guilt, as she turns a blind eye to the family "business," enjoying a comfortable life funded by her husband's cruel and violent dealings.

^[91] A fuller treatment of this issue is given in this book's appendix, "Joshua's Wars of Conquest."

^[101] See, for example, Exodus 33:7–11 and Numbers 12:1–16.

^[111] Numbers 27:12–23; Joshua 1:5, 16–18.

^[121] Further details of this event are unknown, beyond what else we are told by Luke. There we read that Pilate had also mixed their blood with their sacrifices.

^[131] Luke 13:1–5.

^[141] Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23.

Moreover, we observe an additional insight from the fact that Achan's entire household suffered the consequences of his sin alongside him, to say nothing of the thirty-six Israelite warriors who died as a result of his selfishness. Although we argued above that his family members bore guilt of their own, it is also true that there never would have been an opportunity to disobey the Lord in this way, had Achan not returned from Jericho with the cloak, the silver, and the gold. One of sin's greatest lies is that we ourselves are the only ones who are harmed as the result of our faithlessness. This is almost never the case. Even in our most "private" sin, the communities of which we are a part—our families, jobs, churches, friendship circles, etc.—all suffer as a result of our failure to be the godly people Christ calls us to be. How much worse when our compromises bring down others along with us—even, and especially, those whom we love the most?

A MISSED BLESSING

Joshua 8 recounts the attack on Ai. As expected, once the Israelites have recommitted themselves to the Lord, they are able to take the city, this time using clever diversionary tactics in order to draw the enemy forces away from the city. This reinforces the idea we saw in chapter 3, that relying on God's power does not preclude our planning and effort. God works through these ordinary means just as much as he works through the extraordinary.

Unlike the initial attack, however, the Lord commands Joshua to bring up "all the fighting men," not just the "two or three thousand" that the spies had initially advised (Josh 8:1; cf. 7:3). God wants all his people to participate in his act of judgment against this Canaanite city. One of his reasons for this is given in verse 2: "Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves." God commanded all of Israel's men of war to up against Ai so they could all take for themselves what was in the city. Thus, there is a strong note of irony added on top of Achan's tragedy. Had he obeyed God at Jericho he would have been able to carry home plunder at the very next city! Sin is always loss. We don't trust God to bless us at his time and in his way, and so we lean on our own understanding, fooling ourselves into thinking that we will miss out if we wait on the Lord in faithfulness and obedience.

CHAPTER 5 QUESTIONS

When was a time when you saw an entire community of God's people affected by one person's sin?

Joshua 7 tells us exactly why Achan lost his life. Apart from what Scripture tells us, why is it unwise to attempt to offer explanations or reasons God might have for other tragedies we encounter in everyday life?

Why do people have such difficulty accepting that God has the right to take human life?

We see in this lesson how Jesus points the attention of those disturbed by tragic events back at his hearers. Rather than trying to explain why God allowed those horrible things to happen, he tells his hearers, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Why is it that we are so prone to see tragedies as indictments against God, rather than challenges that should convict us to get right with God?

In what ways have the people you love been affected by your sin?

In what ways does the community of God suffer because of your sin?



JOSHUA 8:30-9:27

CHAPTER 6:

TWO COVENANTS

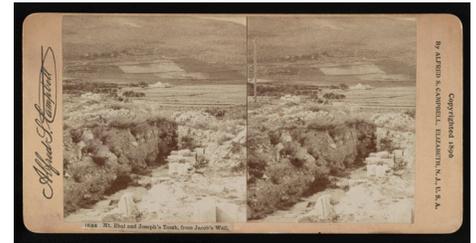
RENEWAL

As members of the community of faith, it is very easy to become detached and to forget about God in the daily routine of life, even when we are pursuing godly things like family and ministry. Therefore, it is necessary to make conscious and purposeful efforts to refocus on the Lord and commit ourselves to him. This is exactly what Joshua leads his people through after the defeat of Ai.

While spontaneous gestures of worship play a big part of our faith, this is not what happens here. Rather, Joshua and the Israelites are acting in accord with some very specific instructions given to them by God through Moses. And they go out of the way to do so. In Deuteronomy 27:1–8, Moses specifically had charged the people to set up a memorial of plastered stones on Mount Ebal as a witness to the covenant,^[1] and to write “all the words of this law very plainly” on it. In addition, they are to construct an altar there for the offering of burnt offerings and peace offerings.^[2] Once this was done, a covenant renewal ceremony was to take place, with six tribes standing on Mount Ebal and the other six on Mount Gerizim, from which they would recite the blessings and curses contained in the Law of Moses.^[3] All this would have required a journey roughly twenty miles north from Ai into the central hill country, into the direct vicinity of the city of Shechem, located in the valley between the two mountains. This is quite a detour in the middle of a military campaign. But it was indeed appropriate to pause and renew the covenant, especially after it had been violated by the sin of Achan.^[4] Joshua 8:33 and 35 tell us that “the entire assembly of Israel” was present, including women, children, and even “sojourners”—those living among Israel although they were neither of Abrahamic descent nor fully incorporated into the fledgling nation.^[5]

But why was all this necessary? Israel is still essentially a landless, nomadic entity, surrounded by hostile powers who were already planning to destroy her.^[6] Now that Achan had been dealt with, Israel was walking in obedience, doing what God had sent her to do. And after all, in all his instructions about renewing the covenant on Mount Ebal, Moses never specified when they were to do so. Instead, we find vague statements like “when the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering” and “when you have crossed over the Jordan.”^[7] Surely this can wait until after the real work is done, can’t it?

Such is the reasoning of all who insist that our acts of devotion to the Lord must always be calibrated according to the dictates of utility—what works is what must take priority, because that is what produces results. Attitudes like this fall short of the many models of godliness that we find throughout the Scriptures, whether it be Samuel leading his people in national repentance while

**The Altar of Ebal**

This altar of uncut stones dating to Joshua’s time that was discovered on Mount Ebal, the site of the covenant renewal ceremony described in Joshua 8:30–35, where Israel’s priests offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. For more details on this impressive find, see footnote 2.

Footnotes:

^[1] Cf. Joshua 24:27. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 328.

^[2] Exactly what “this law” refers to is unclear. Craigie suggests, with some hesitancy, that this would have been Deuteronomy 12–26, the heart of the Deuteronomic law code (*ibid.*). Eugene Merrill sees this as unlikely and suggests the Ten Commandments, which were “the very core and foundation of all the law,” noting that these too were engraved on stone and were also placed in the ark of the covenant (Deuteronomy, NAC 4 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 342). Altars of uncut stones, as we see here, are the standard for solitary altars that function outside the formal Levitical system connected with the tabernacle/temple (Exod 20:22–26). This is why only burnt offerings and peace offerings can be offered on such altars—these offerings are not necessarily for the purpose of atonement, guilt and sin offerings exclusively are (though burnt offerings can be). Interestingly, a 24.5’ x 29.5’ x 9’ altar of uncut stones, part of which dates to the second half of the 13th century BC (Joshua’s time), and filled with pottery sherds and the burnt remains of male bulls, sheep, goats, and fallow deer, was found on Mount Ebal during excavations conducted between 1982 and 1984. See Adam Zertal, “Has Joshua’s Altar Been Found on Mt. Ebal?” *BAR* 11:1 (1985): 26–43.

^[3] Deuteronomy 11:26–32; 27:12–26.

^[4] Joshua 7:11, 15.

^[5] It may also have been that the inhabitants of Shechem had peacefully integrated among them and were among these non-native sojourners, as Shechem is never said to have been attacked by Joshua’s armies. See Richard S. Hess, *Joshua*, TDOT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 190–91.

^[6] Joshua 9:1–2; 10:1.

^[7] Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:4.

the nation stands vulnerable to attack by the Philistines,^[8] Daniel and his companions refusing the best food of Babylon to remain religiously pure,^[9] or Jesus “getting ready” for ministry by spending forty days fasting in the wilderness and later foregoing sleep in order to spend time in private with the Father.^[10] The truth is that putting God first means prioritizing times of spiritual renewal and devotion over other things that are also necessary. This is how Joshua led his people, and because of it, they faced the battles ahead with God’s power on their side, and the confidence that comes from having a clear conscience before the Lord.

SEEKING GOD’S WILL (OR NOT)

The story then pans away from Israel to the response of the land’s native inhabitants. Having heard the news of Jericho and Ai, the kings of the various cities begin to form an alliance to oppose Israel by force. But there was one group that tried a different approach. Rather than marching against Israel in open battle or waiting behind their walls to be attacked, the inhabitants of the nearby city of Gibeon cunningly approached Joshua at Gilgal, disguised as sojourners from a far off country, complete with road-worn clothing and diminished supplies. They claimed to have heard of the deeds of the Lord in their homeland and to have traveled far to seek peace and a covenant with Israel. One cannot help but be reminded of Rahab’s similar motivations.^[11] Joshua agrees, but not before verse 14 informs us that he and his leaders “did not ask counsel from the LORD,” even though, according to Numbers 27:21, this is exactly what Joshua is commanded to do, should he require guidance in such matters.^[12] And so, Israel mistakenly establishes a covenant with some of the native Canaanites, something expressly forbidden by God.^[13]

When the truth of what has happened is discovered, the Israelites march on the four Gibeonite towns of Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim.^[14] However, because of their covenant with them, which involved vows made to the Lord, Israel is not permitted to devote them to destruction, and must honor them as allies. A compromise is reached, by which the Gibeonites become Israel’s servants—“cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation,” and in particular “for the house of God” (vv. 21, 23, 27).^[15] Later in the Old Testament, it is evident that the Gibeonites became incorporated into Israel. In 2 Samuel 21, they fall under David’s protection, as he seeks to right the wrongs done to them by Saul, and in Nehemiah they are among those who rebuild the walls of Jerusalem after the return from Babylonian Exile.^[16]

Although God worked through this blunder to eventually bring about good, it is nevertheless portrayed here as a mistake. Because the leaders of Israel neglected to inquire of the Lord before doing something as important as making a covenant with an entire nation, they unwittingly placed themselves in a position where they would be unable to go forward in full obedience to what God had commanded them. This is what happens when we presume to navigate life’s decisions without stopping first to consider the will of God for our lives. Does God care about whom we form relationships with? What has he revealed about the right ordering of our finances? Is the best career path always the one that will bring the most financial gain? Although our ability to discern God’s will sometimes does not include something as certain as what was available to Joshua, he has not left us without resources for doing so. In fact, we have something that Joshua didn’t—complete Bibles, sitting on our tables and shelves waiting for us to come and drink of his revelation to us, and to teach our hearts the mind of God. This doesn’t guarantee that we will always know what God wants perfectly, or that there won’t be disagreements among faithful, wise, and biblically-informed believers about the meaning of Scripture or what can be rightly inferred from what it says. That is part of what it means to work out our faith in community with one another. But what Joshua 9 warns us of is the danger of never

^[8] First Samuel 7:3–12.

^[9] Daniel 1:8–16.

^[10] Luke 4:12; 6:12; 22:39–46.

^[11] Joshua 2:8–13.

^[12] Verse 7 gives us a subtle warning by calling them “Hivites”—a group consistently identified as one of the “seven peoples” whom Israel was to dispossess (e.g., Deut 7:1).

^[13] Exodus 23:32; 34:12; Deuteronomy 7:2; Judges 2:2.

^[14] Thus, “Gibeonite” does not refer only to someone from the actual city of Gibeon, but to a loose federation of cities, similar to the Philistines, who occupied Ashkelon, Gaza, Gath, Ashdod, and Ekron, as well as other, less prominent towns and villages.

^[15] Submitting as servants to a conquering power in order to avoid destruction was a common practice in the ancient Near East, as is evident from Egyptian, Assyrian, and Hittite accounts. See K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, LHBOTS 98 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 200–204.

^[16] Nehemiah 3:7; 7:25.

seeking the Lord in the first place. God is more dissatisfied with the one who disregards his will than he is with the one who earnestly desires it and yet fails to discern it perfectly.¹⁷⁷

There is a further practical implication from this story regarding questions of vows or commitments made rashly or in ignorance. Questions of this sort often arise in the context of marriages whose validity is called into question because of the circumstances under which they were established.¹⁷⁸ One might think of a Christian who remarries after an unbiblical divorce, or someone who became a Christian after having been married to an unbeliever and now wonders if the relationship is really God's "best" for him or her. It is also not uncommon for missionaries to have to decide what to do in the cases of converts bound to polygamist or polyandrous marriages before having come to Christ. Should they recommend, or even require, divorce in such cases? This is relevant in other realms of life as well, such as business contracts, promises, and financial commitments. Unless such agreements commit us to sin in some way, God expects us to live up to them, especially when we enter into them formally, as we see here in the example of a covenant.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ A good little book on this is Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).

¹⁷⁸ John Piper offers the same insight in "Divorce, Remarriage, and Honoring God," <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/divorce-remarriage-and-honoring-god>.

¹⁷⁹ Covenants are known in the ancient world outside the Bible as well. For some examples of covenants between human beings (that is, where one of the parties is not God), see Genesis 21:27–32; 26:28–33; 31:43–50; 1 Samuel 20:12–17.

CHAPTER 6 QUESTIONS

What practices do you currently do to regularly renew your relationship with the Lord?

How do you strike a balance between God's objective truth and your own subjective feelings in your personal devotional habits? How might they be lopsided and in need of correction?

In what ways does a healthy, renewed relationship with the Lord help us in the following areas?

Family: _____

Church: _____

Workplace: _____

Friendships: _____

Finances : _____

Ministry: _____

Witness to unbelievers: _____

What are some big things in your life for which you need to seek God's direction?



JOSHUA 10-12

CHAPTER 7:

SEEING GOD IN

ALL THINGS

THE BATTLE OF GIBEON

The alliance forged between Israel and Gibeon created a strategic disaster for the cities in southern Canaan. Israelite-controlled territory now stood between them and any potential aid that might have come from the north. In response, five of the most prominent cities in the south attacked Gibeon, prompting its people to appeal to Israel for help. Faithful to his covenantal obligation, Joshua marched his armies from Gilgal to come to their aid, with the assurance from the Lord, “Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands. Not a man of them shall stand before you” (Josh 10:8). After marching all night, Joshua’s forces engaged the enemy coalition in battle at dawn, successfully repelling them back southward as far as the cities of Azekah and Makkedah.

As was the case in the taking of both Jericho and Ai, the Israelites’ success in these conflicts was the work of the Lord. Joshua chapter 10 shows this to us in three ways. First, all the verbs in verse 10 are in the singular, referring to the Lord, not Israel: “The LORD threw them into a panic before Israel, and he struck them . . . and he pursued them . . . and he struck them.”^[1] Second, verse 11 tells us that as the enemy was fleeing in retreat, God supernaturally intervened, showering down large hailstones from heaven on them, which killed even more than Israel had put to the sword. Third, seeing this as an opportunity to defeat five of the strongest southern cities with one decisive blow, Joshua prayed an extraordinary prayer to the Lord, for the sun in the east and the moon in the west to stand still, apparently extending the day so that Israel’s victory would be complete. The incredible nature of these events is fully acknowledged by the text, which cites another record of that day in the now lost book of Jashar, reflecting, “There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel” (v. 14).^[2]

THE HAND OF GOD AT WORK

The called community stands in contrast to a culture that refuses to acknowledge God. One way this is manifested is in our keen awareness that the Lord is constantly at work through our efforts. This simple truth stands behind all the events of our lives, just like it was true in the incredible stories that unfold in the Old Testament. Israel’s war with the southern coalition stands out because it gives us a glimpse behind the curtain to see God’s hand directly intervening to accomplish his purposes. He is not sitting silent on the sidelines while Joshua does all the work. Quite the opposite. God is the main participant in these conflicts, whose involvement determines the outcome and whose absence all but ensures his people’s defeat, as we saw in the failed assault on Ai. There the Israelites failed because God had withdrawn his presence (7:12), and they eventually succeeded because after Achan’s sin had been dealt with he was once again among them. The difference between the battle of Gibeon and

Footnotes:

^[1] The NIV misses this entirely, following some ancient versions by inserting the words “Joshua and the Israelites” as the subject of the sentence. These words are absent in the Hebrew. The ESV also errs in this respect, but notes the alternative in a footnote. See David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua*, NAC 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 237; Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, AYB 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 281. Admittedly, it is possible to read three of these four verbs as plurals by repointing the Hebrew vowels. However, the stated subject of the first verb is the LORD, and all the others are identical in form.

^[2] This is often cited as one of the most astonishing miracles in Scripture. From a modern standpoint, the implication is that the earth stood still on its axis, the physical implications of which should not be lost on us. Yet we see no reason to think that the one who created the very laws of nature would not have the power to suspend those laws or to act in ways that defy them, as is the case with many of the miracles in Scripture, such as parting seas, toppling cities, healing lepers, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead. If there is an indication in the text that the events of Joshua 10:12–14 are less than literal (e.g., perhaps figurative imagery), it is that the sun’s position over Gibeon in the east places Joshua’s prayer in the morning—a strange time for him to have requested more daylight. John Walton offers an interesting interpretation of this passage. He points to the common use of celestial omens in the ancient world, many of which involve language comparable to what we find in Joshua 10:12–14. The presence of the sun and the moon in the sky at the same time was often regarded as a sign portending the outcome of particular battles or other important events. Such an understanding would dramatically impact our understanding of what Joshua was asking for, although the exact details of how such an omen would have been interpreted are lost to us. The weakness of Walton’s proposal is that it requires several interpretive assumptions to work (e.g., the reworking of “until” in v. 13). See the most recent updated version of this paper, “Joshua 10:12–15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts,” as Appendix C to *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites*, LWS 4 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2017), available for free at <https://www.ivpress.com/Media/Default/Downloads/Misc/5184-appendix.pdf>. Decades ago, John S. Holladay, Jr. offered a similar interpretation in his article, “The Day(s) the Moon Stood Still,” *JBL* 87 (1968): 166–78. A good summary of the issues this text raises, as well as an evaluation of the various solutions that have been offered, both popular and scholarly, can be found in Howard, 238–49. In the end, Howard tentatively comes to a different conclusion than we do here.

the battle of Ai—as well as the battles to come in chapters 11 and 12 (none of which feature God’s miraculous intervention)—is not that God helped his people in one conflict but not in another. The real difference is that at Gibeon he acted in a way that was more obvious than in the less overtly “supernatural” battles.

The Bible presents a worldview where God is sovereignly in control of all things. Jesus’ answer to human anxiety, for example, is to point to the Lord’s providential care for even the birds in the sky, the grass on the ground, and the lilies in the fields.^[53] And the apostle Paul’s encouragement for suffering Christians is not to hope that God will one day regain control over his wayward creation, but to assure us that “for those who love God all things work together for good.”^[54] God is in control now. When we walk close to him, we trust that his hand is at work in all things, even when we don’t see it.

By way of contrast, the unregenerate human heart is ignorant of God’s work and stubbornly resists him, to its own destruction. We see this played out in the account of the fate of those who oppose Israel in these chapters.

THE WAGES OF SIN

During the retreat of the southern coalition, the five kings who had led the attack on Gibeon abandon their people and hide themselves in a cave. Upon discovering this, Joshua orders his men to block the entrance of the cave with large stones until the cities are defeated. He then orders the kings executed and their bodies hung on trees until evening. This accords with the procedure prescribed in Deuteronomy 21:22–23 for criminals who were cursed by God because they were guilty of capital offenses.^[55]

Chapter 10 concludes with abbreviated summaries of Israel’s victories against the remaining major cities of the south,^[56] making a point to note that they were all devoted to destruction, “just as the LORD God of Israel had commanded” (v. 40). By the end of this campaign, Israel is in control of the majority of southern Canaan, with the conspicuous exception of the Philistine territory on the coast, which is mentioned in 13:2–3 as part of “the land that yet remains.”

No one reading the narrative of these events should be surprised at this outcome. Everything playing out on the field of battle is in line with Moses’ words to Joshua’s generation, urging them to rely on the Lord for all they had to accomplish: “He will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them.”^[57] What is tragic is the stubborn persistence of the southern cities to continue in their resolve against God and against his people. In doing so, they show that any notion of Israel dwelling peacefully in the land alongside the Canaanites is mere fantasy, and bear witness to the justness of the wrath of God against them. Their resolve to continue in sin echoes in hardened hearts even today, for whom Paul’s words to those who rejected the gospel in Pisidian Antioch still ring true: “You thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.”^[58]

The cold truth about the human heart is that we all will fight to the bitter end to preserve our



Hazor

Hazor, located at Tell el-Qedah, was one of the largest and most powerful cities in the land of Canaan. Its upper city covered 25 acres and overlooked a lower area of 175 acres, and both were protected by massive walls. Its political influence throughout the ancient Near East is attested by existing correspondence between it and the cities of Mari, Ugarit, and Amarna, the capital of Egypt’s eighteenth dynasty. In accordance with the account of the city’s destruction in Joshua 11:13, archaeological excavations have uncovered compelling evidence of massive destruction dating to the Late Bronze Age, including a thick layer of ashes as thick as three feet. Oil stored in jars in the city’s palace caused a conflagration estimated to have exceeded 2,350° Fahrenheit. Among the ruins are several religious statues that were smashed into pieces with their heads and hands severed (cf. Deuteronomy 7:5, 25; 1 Samuel 5:4).

^[53] Matthew 6:25–33.

^[54] Romans 8:28.

^[55] This practice, also used against the king of Ai (8:29), was a common method of shaming enemies in both Assyria and Egypt (K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, LHBOTS 98 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 222–23, n. 88). According to Deuteronomy 21:23, the corpse was to be removed in the evening to avoid polluting the land with bloodguilt. See Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 284–85 and J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC 5 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 332.

^[56] That is, Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir.

^[57] Deuteronomy 7:24.

^[58] Acts 13:46.

imagined right to be our own gods. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside and together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”¹⁰¹ Were it not for the grace of God awakening our stubborn hearts and giving us new life through his Spirit, none of us would come to him.

TROUBLE UP NORTH

It wasn’t long before word of Israel’s sweeping victories reached the ears of Jabin, the king of Canaan’s most powerful city, Hazor.¹⁰¹ Rallying support from his allies in the north, Jabin amasses a “great horde, in number like the sand that is on the sea-shore” (Josh 11:4). This was without doubt the most powerful and frightening force Israel had faced since the Egyptian army was drowned in the Sea of Reeds. Like the Egyptians, not only were their numbers impossibly large, but they were armed to the teeth “with very many horses and chariots”—the ancient equivalent of tanks and heavy artillery. And this time, there was no sea to save Israel. They would have to fight. But once again, God assured Joshua of victory even before the enemy was in sight, giving special assurance that he would fulfill his promises to Israel, despite the Canaanites’ impressive battle technology: “You shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire” (v. 6).

And so, the battle was over before it began. In the span of just a few verses, Jabin’s coalition is defeated in yet another decisive victory for the people of Israel, who fought with the Lord as their strength. The text gives the destruction of Hazor special attention. Aside from Jericho, it is the only defeated Canaanite city that was burned (11:11–13; cf. 6:24). As he had done in the south, Joshua devoted all the cities of the north to destruction, leaving “nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses” (v. 15).

Despite the fact that the war against these kings is described as lasting “a long time,” at no time do any of the cities attempt to make peace with Israel (v. 19). And the reason given is telling: “It was the LORD’s doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, as the LORD commanded Moses” (v. 20).

Such language, which echoes the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the book of Exodus, is challenging.¹⁰¹ Does the idea that God hardens people’s hearts and then executes judgment against them mean that he punishes some of us for things he makes us do? Hardly. In none of the places where Scripture speaks this way do we find God making people into what they had not already chosen to be through their own sinful decisions. As with Pharaoh, so with the kings who marched against Israel—before they had ever encountered Israel, they were already idol-worshiping sinners, ruling over corrupt cities that cared nothing about God, teeming with violence, injustice, and other forms of depravity. Having seen the examples of Gibeon, Rahab and others like her, and all the other sojourners already living among Israel, these kings confirm God’s judgment against them by bitterly clinging to their power and rejecting him. God is not turning otherwise godly men into unwitting victims.¹⁰² They already stood opposed to the Lord and Israel; God’s hardening is simply the final push that steeled their resolve to march into open battle.

¹⁰¹ Romans 3:10–12.

¹⁰¹ Most likely, Jabin is the dynastic name of multiple kings of Hazor. Recall that Deborah and Barak’s opponent Sisera in Judges 4–5 served another “Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor.” One of the Mari texts of the eighteenth-century BC refers to Yabni-Addu, king of Hazor. See A. Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience*, Schweich Lectures 1984 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 56–68. A fragmentary cuneiform text excavated at Hazor also bears a personal name beginning *ib-ni*, which can be read as the equivalent of the Hebrew Jabin. See W. Horowitz and A. Schaffer, “A Fragment of a Letter from Hazor,” *IEJ* 42 (1992): 165–66. The evidence is summarized and expanded in Richard S. Hess, “Non-Israelite Personal Names in the Book of Joshua,” *CBQ* 58 (1996): 206–7.

¹⁰¹ This also occurs in Exodus 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8.

¹⁰² In describing the universal sinfulness of all mankind, Romans 1:18–32 speaks about how we, idolaters by choice, plunge ourselves into sin, and how God in turn “gives us up” to our evil inclinations (vv. 24, 26, 28). This reminds us of how enslavement to sinful passions is its own form of punishment.

CHAPTER 7 QUESTIONS

What are some of the biggest testimonies of God's hand at work in your life?

What can you do to get better at communicating this truth to others?

Who benefits from you being more expressive about the ways God demonstrates his providential love and care for you?

How is it damaging to your faith to only see God's power manifested in the miraculous?

One of the big takeaways from the stories about the kings who opposed Israel is how they clung to their godless way of life, despite every clear indication of how destructively irrational it was to do so. In what ways do you still do this?

What should be our approach to reaching a culture that is characterized by this kind of stubborn and spiritually dead rebellion against God?

Take a minute to read Romans 1:18–32. Here, Paul describes God's "giving up" of people to their own sinful choices as itself a form of judgment. When was a time when you experienced this in your own life? Where do you see it taking place in the lives of others?



JOSHUA 13-19

CHAPTER 8:

THE WORK TO BE DONE

WHEN THE PEOPLE of Israel were at Mount Sinai roughly forty years earlier, Joshua was already of fighting age and old enough to serve as Moses' assistant.^[1] In chapter 13, we find him "old and advanced in years" (v. 1). Although many of the prominent cities of Canaan have been conquered, much of the land remains unsubdued, especially along the coast and further inland in the North (Josh 13:1–6). While Joshua's work had been integral to God's plan, he also understands that he is just one piece of something bigger and far more magnificent that God is doing. And so, his role as the Lord's appointed leader now shifts to the work of equipping others to continue the mission after him. As the community of God's people, we are reminded to sow seeds of faithfulness, leaving a rich legacy for future generations.

Chapters 13–19 deal with the first steps Joshua takes to accomplish this as he apportions land to each tribe for their inheritance. The land of the tribes that has already been allocated east of the Jordan is specified first. These are Reuben, Gad, and East Manasseh (13:8–33; cf. 1:12–18). Next, Joshua assigns the larger territories west of the Jordan to the tribes descended from Joseph and Judah, the two most prominent sons of Jacob (chaps. 14–17).^[2] Lastly, the remaining western tribes of Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin receive their lands by lot during a ceremony before the tent of meeting at Shiloh (chaps. 18–19). The Levites will receive their inheritance in chapters 20 and 21.^[3] Special focus is given to the cities gifted to Caleb and his progeny (14:6–14; 15:13–19), as well as to Joshua himself (19:49–50) for their brave leadership stretching all the way back to Israel's years in the wilderness. Recall that these men were the only members of the previous generation allowed to enter the land, owing to their faithfulness in spite of the fearful report of the twelve spies in Numbers 13.

MARKS OF A WISE LEADER

The very act of assigning the entire land as an inheritance for Israel is itself an act of profound trust in the Lord, who commanded Joshua to do this work even though much had yet to be conquered. The territorial allotments detailed in these seven chapters are grounded in the promises of what God would continue to do through and for his people. Joshua's battles are over. Going forward, Israel's success will depend on how much they allow God's vision of what they will one day be to govern their actions here and now. Would they live up to their calling to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,^[4] dwelling under God's blessing as a light to the nations? Or would they allow the idolatrous Canaanite religion and culture to turn them from the Lord, rendering them indistinguishable from the very people whom they were tasked to drive out?

With the exception of Israel's initial failure at Ai, and perhaps a lack of discernment in dealing with the people of Gibeon, the impression given is that Israel's conquest of the land under Joshua's leadership was a great success. Yet one of the dangers in leadership is that people's hope and confidence can become more attached to the leader him- or herself than to the Lord. This is the fundamental stumbling block that accompanies all "great" men and women of God—successful ministry that does much to build the Lord's kingdom is also fertile ground for the creation of religious gurus. When the Corinthian church slipped into factionalism, with some proclaiming, "I follow Paul," and others, "I follow Apollos," and yet others, "I follow Cephas," it wasn't because these men were ineffective in their ministries!^[5] Good leaders do all they can to discourage this, and resist

Footnotes:

^[1] Exodus 17:8–13; 23:1; 24:13.

^[2] The Joseph tribes west of the Jordan are Ephraim and West Manasseh.

^[3] This is foreshadowed in 13:14, 32–33; 13:7; 14:3–4. Simeon's inheritance is unique in that it is the only territory completely surrounded by another tribe, which was Judah (19:9). According to Jacob's pronouncement over Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5–7, both tribes are "scattered" as part of their punishment for slaughtering the inhabitants of Shechem (Genesis 34). For the Levites, this is combined with their elevated status in Israel's religious life, and they receive six cities within other tribal territories as their own.

^[4] Exodus 19:6.

^[5] See 1 Corinthians 1:11–17; 3:1–23.



Early Israelite Settlements

Over the last fifty years, land surveys conducted throughout Israel have uncovered over 700 small settlements in the central highlands of Samaria and Judea dating to the early Iron Age (ca. 1125–1150 BC), roughly the time of Joshua and shortly afterwards, corresponding exactly to the locations detailed in Joshua 11:16–20; 13:1–7; 17:1–18. These simple domiciles were poor and unwallled, and share several characteristics, such as four-room houses, the use terraced agriculture, lime-plastered cisterns cut into bedrock, subterranean grain silos, and ceramics in continuity with later, clearly Israelite, sites, but not earlier Canaanite ones. The emergence of these dwellings was accompanied by a significant population swell of over 600 percent between the 13th and 11th centuries. Also notable is the conspicuous lack of pig bones in these sites, in a region where pigs were typically bred in large quantities. The pastoral, egalitarian lifestyle attested by these settlements is exactly what we would expect from the biblical descriptions of Israelite life before the tribes were consolidated under the reigns of Kings Saul and David.

opportunities to make people and ministries dependent on them.

Even in these chapters, before his wise commissioning of the next generation of leaders in chapter 23, Joshua shows that he understands this. Not only is he busy assigning large portions of land that have not yet been won, but when Ephraim and West Manasseh come to him, troubled over the small size of their allotted territory, he tasks them to address the issue themselves:

You are a numerous people and have great power. You shall not have one allotment only, but the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it to its farthest borders. For you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong (17:17–18).

Joshua refuses to enlarge their borders by taking from other tribes. Instead, he commissions Ephraim and Manasseh to make good use of the land they had already been given, both by clearing forest and by driving out the Canaanite inhabitants. Additionally, Joshua's words to the remaining seven tribes in chapter 18 sound almost as if he is frustrated at their lack of initiative: "How long will you put off going in to take possession of the land, which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you?" (v. 3) These tribal leaders need to realize that God is no less with them than he is with Joshua. As he trusted in the Lord to enable him to fulfill his calling, it was now their turn to demonstrate the same trust. Whether Joshua himself is among them is irrelevant.

AN INHERITANCE FOR ALL GOD'S PEOPLE

No doubt, many of us might breeze over this week's chapters, paying little attention to the many unpronounceable place names, listed in almost excruciating detail, delineating the ancient boundaries of Israel's tribal real estate. The temptation is to scan it just close enough to catch the short bursts of narration, because everything else might as well be written in another language (in fact, it more or less is!). Let's be honest—this isn't exactly the most edifying portion of holy Scripture. This is partly because very few of us are excited by biblical geography. But the other reason is that we tend to under-appreciate the immensity of the blessing that God bestowed on his people by giving them this land. Understanding the context will never transform Joshua 19 into a spiritual banquet like Ephesians 1 or Romans 8, but it does help us to see the profound importance of what Joshua was doing when God gave Israel her inheritance, and why the text gives so much attention and detail to it.

Israel had an agrarian economy, which meant that each family's ability to provide for itself was tied to what they could produce on their land. In order to ensure provision for even the smallest parts of society, the Law of Moses required that each plot of land be granted as a permanent possession to Israel's tribes, clans, and families,¹⁶¹ effectively decentralizing the nation's wealth and granting a basic, divinely-ordained protection to the lower units of society. This stood in stark contrast to the more feudal Canaanite city states, in which the king owned all the land and allowed his people to live on it in exchange for heavy taxes.

Through Moses, God issued laws aimed at ensuring that future generations would be able to enjoy justice and equity for all who were diligent enough to work for it. Several of these are clustered in Leviticus 25, where we learn that every fifty years all land located outside cities that had been sold, for whatever reason, was to be returned to its owner. In addition, no such land purchase was final, meaning that it could always be redeemed (bought back) at any time before the fiftieth year by a fellow member of the owner's clan or the owner himself.¹⁷¹ Finally, landowners experiencing economic hardship were to be supported through love expressed in charitable giving, in order to prevent them from ending up in compromising predicaments. If loans were made, interest could not be charged. If they had to resort to selling their labor, they were not to be treated as slaves, and could be redeemed at any time. Tragically, Israel did not always live up to these principles, and the prophets sent by God issued scathing rebukes against flagrant disregard for these standards of justice.¹⁸¹

We encounter an interesting issue pertaining to inheritance rights in Joshua 17:3–6. Back in Numbers 27, five sisters had approached Moses and the other Israelite leaders with a dilemma. In most ancient cultures, Israel included, the family

¹⁶¹ This is the fundamental organization of Israelite society, and is illustrated by the process by which Achan was discovered in Joshua 7:14–18.

¹⁷¹ The laws for houses in walled cities were different. For these, there was no fifty-year release and the opportunity for redemption lasted only for one year, except in Levitical cities, where the right of redemption was unlimited. The apparent reason for this distinction is that cities were not part of family inheritance. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, AYB 3B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2198 and Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, NAC 3A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 308.

¹⁸¹ First Kings 21:1–24; Isaiah 5:8; Jeremiah 34:8–22; Micah 2:1–2.

inheritance was passed on through sons, in order to keep property within the family.¹⁰¹ Their father, Zelophehad, had died having no sons, and thus no legal heir to his inheritance. “Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son,” these sisters asked. “Give us a possession among our father’s brothers” (v. 4). In response, the Lord established the legal provision that inheritance would be passed through daughters when a family had no surviving son to be its heir.¹⁰² Later on in Numbers 36, this law receives the added provision that daughters possessing inheritance rights are only to marry within their clans, so as not to permanently transfer inheritance to other clans.

The promise of land was an intrinsic part of Israel’s identity ever since the time of Abraham.¹⁰³ But even before this, land played a central role in God’s plan with his people. Our first parents were placed in the Garden of Eden, and their role there was defined by “working and keeping” it.¹⁰⁴ When the corruption of sin entered into human existence our alienation from God partly consisted of exile from this place of blessing, as well as a cursing of the ground and the frustration of our efforts to cultivate it.¹⁰⁵ At the time of the flood, human depravity had affected not just individual people, but the “earth” as well,¹⁰⁶ reminding us that our sin has consequences for all creation. On the other hand, our redemption in Christ is part of God’s wider program to redeem all things.¹⁰⁷ And when the final blessing for the people of God is described in Revelation 21 and 22, our hope is shown very much as a place, a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth, patterned after what we forfeited in Eden.¹⁰⁸ God’s aim for humankind throughout the Scriptures amounts to him providing a way for his people to dwell with him in a place that he provides. And now here, in Joshua, as the people receive their land, we see this partially realized. All the laws that are designed to promote justice there are given, not just to provide sustenance and good social order, but to reflect the heart of God, who cares for every single one of his beloved, and desires to dwell in their midst.

FAILURE TO CARRY OUT THE TASK

A survey of these chapters would be incomplete without giving attention to some of the cracks that are beginning show in the façade of Israel’s faithfulness. We have already observed that large portions of the land have not been secured by the time Joshua divides Canaan up among the tribes. This is understandable. But we also learn of various failures to complete the task of driving out the inhabitants of the land. East of the Jordan, both the Geshurites and the Maacathites are living among the Israelites (13:13). In the territory of Judah, Jerusalem remains under control of the Jebusites (15:63). The tribe of Manasseh, rather than driving out the inhabitants of Gezer, put them to forced labor (16:10), as they do also to the Canaanites living in Beth-shean, Ibleam, Dor, Ed-dor, Tanaach, Megiddo, and Naphath (17:11–13). All but the last of these describe situations that persisted “to this day”—that is, at least until the time of the writing and/or editing of the book of Joshua.

The reasons for this failure are not entirely clear. Sometimes, no doubt, it was because the work was hard. At other times it is due, as we see in these passages, because they realized that they could extract cheap labor from the Canaanites if they ignored God’s mandate to drive them from the land.¹⁰⁹ Israel was already settling into a pattern of less than full obedience to the Lord’s commands. Anyone who has ever been disturbed by the stories recounted in the book of Judges should note well that it is a record of what Israel reaped from the seeds of complacency that were sown during the time of Joshua. Indeed, Judges 2:11–13 tells us exactly what happened after Joshua’s death as a result of this:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods

¹⁰¹ In marriage, the woman became part of the husband’s family.

¹⁰² Likewise, in families lacking both sons and daughters, inheritance would pass to the deceased’s brothers; if there were none, then it would go to the nearest kinsman in his clan (vv. 9–11).

¹⁰³ Genesis 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:12–20; 17:8.

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 2:15.

¹⁰⁵ Genesis 3:17, 22–24.

¹⁰⁶ “The wickedness of man was great in the earth” (Gen 6:5); God “regretted he had made man on the earth” (v. 6); “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence” (v. 11); “the earth . . . was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (v. 12); “the earth is filled with violence,” so that God will destroy mankind “with the earth” (v. 13).

¹⁰⁷ Acts 3:21; Romans 8:22; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20.

¹⁰⁸ Note, for example, the rivers flowing out of the New Jerusalem and presence of the tree of life (Rev 22:1–2).

¹⁰⁹ Eventually, King Solomon drafted the remaining Canaanite elements in the land as slaves to support his ambitious building projects (1 Kings 9:15–22).

of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

Time does not automatically correct our moral failures. If anything, it exacerbates them. Any community that shelves God's truth in exchange for its own wisdom will eventually reap the consequences, even if it takes years. Israel's unwillingness to complete the task God had given her would eventually become a major reason she never truly became the just and godly society envisioned in the Law of Moses.

CHAPTER 8 QUESTIONS

What are some ways that the church today stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before us?

In what areas is the church today sowing seeds of faithfulness for future generations, and in what areas is it failing to do so?

What is God's vision for the future of the church, prior to his return? In what ways are you personally committed to that vision?

In this lesson, we learned about how Joshua shows his concern to not allow the people to hold him up as a religious guru. Why is it dangerous for our faith to be too closely wed to the leadership of particular individuals?

Which leaders have the biggest impact on your faith? What do you need to do to make sure that your faith doesn't become overly dependent on them and their ministries?

In what ways is the church today exchanging God's truth for its own wisdom? What can you do to help correct the course?



JOSHUA 20-22

CHAPTER 9:

WORSHIP

& JUSTICE

THE FINAL PHASES of Israel's settlement in the land take place in Joshua 20–22, with the tribe of Levi given its inheritance and the tribes east of the Jordan returning to theirs. Both accounts underscore the dual pillars of justice and worship as central values for Israel. No community that seeks to be faithful to the Lord can succeed without both in place.

In the absence of worship, human society ceases to be just and devolves into relativistic free for all, with everyone doing what is right in their own eyes and power being volleyed between those with the loudest voices, the greatest numbers, and the most strength. Indeed, this is what we see played out whenever people turn from the Lord to worship false gods, both in Israel's history, as well as our own. Worship only happens when we do that for which we were created and honor God by finding our greatest joy and fulfillment in him.

However, true worship cannot happen if God's people are not pursuing justice. It is impossible to have a healthy vertical relationship with God without healthy horizontal relationships with other people. This is why in Matthew 22:34–40, when Jesus was asked to name the one greatest commandment, he insisted on giving two: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (worship),^[1] and, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (justice).^[2] Or, in the words of John, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”^[3] Biblical justice is not merely an abstract legal concept that can be mandated through force of law or idealistic social programs. Rather, it is generated by a sincere love for one another, and is defined by God's standards of righteousness. Without it, all our efforts at worship, no matter how otherwise “orthodox,” are nothing but cold and empty religious motions.

SERVANTS WHO MAKE WORSHIPERS

Neither worship nor justice happen automatically. They are brought about by God working through servants whom he appoints and equips to act as his ambassadors—agents of change who serve the Lord by serving people. One of the ways God sought to accomplish this in ancient Israel was by appointing the Levites to live among the people throughout the land, whose job it was to guide them and teach them his ways. While only Levites who were descended from Aaron could serve as priests, the entire tribe was to be dedicated exclusively to the service of the Lord. Their duties included assisting the Aaronic priests,^[4] transporting the tabernacle and its contents when necessary,^[5] distinguishing cleanness and uncleanness among the people,^[6] teaching the Law, and serving as judges in disputed matters.^[7] In exchange for their full-time service, they were given their own cities, and were sustained by contributions provided by their fellow Israelites.^[8]

However, the need for the Lord's chosen servants to minister spiritually to the broader population did not stop with the Levites. At its root, the purpose of God's covenant with Israel was to make the entire nation into a “kingdom of priests.”^[9] They would do this by being a godly example to other nations, proclaiming the Lord's truth to them, interceding on their behalf through prayer and offerings, and preserving God's revelation to them in the Scriptures.^[10] Viewed from this perspective, God's plan was for the Levites to minister to Israel, so that Israel, in turn, could minister the world, fulfilling his initial promise to Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”^[11]

Footnotes:

^[1] Deuteronomy 6:5.

^[2] Leviticus 19:18.

^[3] First John 4:20.

^[4] Numbers 4.

^[5] Numbers 18:1–7.

^[6] Deuteronomy 24:8.

^[7] Deuteronomy 17:8–13; 31:9–13; 33:8–10. For a fuller description of the Levites' duties, see Numbers 1:47–54; chapters 3–4; 18:1–7. The rationale behind setting aside an entire tribe for exclusive devotion to ministry is given in Numbers 3:11–13. Here, we find that when the Lord spared the firstborn of every family in Israel during the tenth plague of Egypt, he consecrated them. He then set aside the tribe of Levi to serve in their place, so that every Israelite family would not be required to contribute their firstborn to the full-time vocational service of maintaining the nation's holiness. For an excellent, fuller discussion of the historical place of the Levites in Israel, see D. A. Garrett, “Levi, Levites,” *DOTP*, 519–22.

^[8] Deuteronomy 12:19; 14:27–29; 26:12.

^[9] Exodus 19:6.

^[10] Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 423.

^[11] Genesis 12:3.

Yet, as the nation's history progressed, it became increasingly evident that their sin would prevent them from accomplishing God's purpose for them.^[121] Then, "in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son,"^[122] who succeeded where Israel did not, becoming mankind's great high priest, "who put away sin by the sacrifice of himself,"^[123] and opened up a perfect and permanent way to God through himself.^[124] His people, the church, comprised of all believers, both Jew and Gentile, now stands as a kingdom of priests,^[125] scattered throughout the entire world, as the Levites were to be throughout Israel, with our mission to make disciples of all mankind, worshiping God in spirit and in truth.^[127]

SERVANTS WHO WORK FOR JUSTICE

The account of the Levitical inheritance also involves an important example of God's standards of justice that he expected to be upheld as an integral part of the nation's religious life, in particular by the establishment of certain Levitical cities as "cities of refuge."

Death was a far more common reality of daily life in the ancient world than it is today, and much of it, like today, happened at the hands human beings. In dealing with this, the Law of Moses, similar to many other legal systems, distinguished between involuntary manslaughter and killing with intent.^[126] But even those who were guilty of only accidentally causing death would find themselves in danger from bereaved family members and other kinsmen seeking vengeance. Although this kind of vigilante justice seems to have been outlawed in Leviticus 19:18,^[129] it was still an unfortunate reality of life. In order to provide refuge for people in danger of such retribution, six cities that had been given to the Levites were designated cities of refuge, three on each side of the Jordan River.^[120] After having been found not guilty of premeditated murder, the accused individual was to remain in one of these cities until the death of the high priest. This served the dual function of holding the manslayer accountable for the taking of life,^[121] while at the same time guarding him from lopsided vengeance masquerading as justice.

These cities of refuge are mentioned here partly because they were the inheritance of the Levites. But they also served an important function in preventing the shedding of innocent blood and polluting the land. This is precisely the explanation given for them in Numbers 35:

^[121] This can be seen, for example, in the progression of thought through the "servant songs" of Isaiah 41–53. Initially, the entire nation is to be God's servant (41:8; 44:1–5, 21–22), anointed with God's Spirit to "bring forth justice to the nations" (42:1), a "light" to them, "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6). But the nation failed in this mission as God's servant, having become blind and deaf through its own rebellion, and itself a recipient of God's judgment (42:18–25). These oracles culminate in a final song, in which a new servant is called forth, who would suffer as a substitute, not only for the transgressions of God's failed servant Israel, but for those of the entire world, accomplishing what Jacob's offspring never could (52:13–53:12).

^[122] Galatians 4:4.

^[123] Hebrews 9:23–28.

^[124] Hebrews 10:19–22.

^[125] First Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10.

^[126] John 4:23–24.

^[127] The mere presence of intent was not sufficient to qualify an act of killing as sinful or criminal. For example, capital punishment was permitted (though not necessarily required) for several crimes, such as murder and other violations that profaned Israel's covenant with God.

^[128] Deuteronomy 19:11–13 notwithstanding, Jeffrey Tigay argues that this text introduces an innovation in ancient law, namely the distinction between the innocent and the guilty in asylum laws. He writes, "Not even the sacred protection of the altar can be invoked amorally" (cf. Exod 21:14; Deuteronomy, JPSTC [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 182). See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, AYB 3A (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1650–51 and Tikva Frymer-Kenski, "Anatolia and the Levant: Israel," in *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, HdO 71/72, ed. Raymond Westbrook (Boston: Brill, 2003), 976. There is some evidence that blood vengeance was appropriate and even encouraged in some other cultures in the ancient Near East. See Kathryn Slanski, "Middle Babylonian Period" (516) and Karen Radner, "Mesopotamia: Neo-Assyrian Period" (905) in Westbrook.

^[129] Numbers 35:6–34; Deuteronomy 19:1–13. During the time of wilderness wanderings, and for some time afterwards, provision was also made for the manslayer to flee to the tabernacle and take hold of the horns of the altar there, whereupon he was to be shown asylum (Exod 21:12–14). This recourse was used in latter times, as we find in the account of Adonijah's failed usurpation of David's throne in 1 Kings 1 (esp. vv. 49–51; see also Joab's actions in 1 Kgs 2:28), although there the offense did not involve the taking of life.

^[130] Manslaughter does appear to have been a crime under biblical law, even though it was distinguished from murder. Nevertheless, there were consequences for the taking of human life, even if it was accidental. To dwell in a city of refuge away from one's family was itself a form of punishment. No price could be paid to redeem the accused from one of the cities (Num 35:32) and protection from blood vengeance existed only inside them (v. 27). "Therefore, the cities of refuge functioned as punishment for the person guilty of unintentional homicide and as protection from avenger of blood" (T. A. Clarke, "Cities of Refuge," DOTE, 126).

You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel (Num 35:33–34).

The laws governing the cities of refuge are but one glimpse that the Old Testament gives us of God’s heart for justice, displayed here in the balance of several important concerns that coalesce to govern such unfortunate situations. They model the kind of nuanced, compassionate, and impartial thinking that is needed for Christians to speak and act with moral clarity in a world that is desperately trying to find its way.

AN ALTAR BEYOND THE JORDAN

We have already learned that the tribes of East Manasseh, Rueben, and Gad were given their inheritance east of the Jordan River. These were lands largely subdued before Israel crossed the river and entered into Canaan. And now, having seen their faithfulness in fighting alongside their fellow Israelites to secure the lands for the western tribes, an elderly Joshua addresses them, “You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you and have obeyed my voice in all that I have commanded you. You have not forsaken your brothers these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the LORD your God” (22:3). Then, he blesses them and sends them to their inheritance.

On their way home, the two and a half tribes construct a large altar, close enough to the Jordan that it can be seen from their side. But when word of it reaches the other tribes, they are anything but impressed. Rather, they gather to make war on the eastern tribes and send representatives to confront them, accusing them of “breaking faith” with the Lord—the same language that was used to describe Achan’s sin in 7:1.^[22] After all, God’s presence dwelt in the tabernacle, and the only altar for worshiping him was there.^[23] With Israel’s failure in turning from the Lord to worship other gods still fresh in their minds (22:17, 20 cf. Numbers 25), there now stands an exact replica of the tabernacle’s altar (22:18), only larger! Are East Manasseh, Rueben, and Gad disassociating themselves from the tabernacle, God’s chosen place of worship, and perhaps even planning on worshiping foreign deities alongside, or even instead of, the Lord?

Once again, we see worship standing at the center of the identity of God’s people. We will always come to God with imperfections—hands defiled from sin, divided affections, and hearts pulled towards all kinds of things other than the Lord. Rather than rejecting us, God provides a way for us to be restored, cleansed from all our impurities, and welcomed as his beloved daughters and sons. This was revealed to the Israelites dimly in the system of sacrifices and offerings, and is realized perfectly in the giving of Jesus, who “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”^[24] But it is not enough simply that something that we call worship takes place; it needs to be right worship. As Jesus told the woman at the well, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”^[25] God has made known the way to himself to all would-be worshipers, ancient as well as modern. To disregard that way in favor of our own preferences is to turn worship into idolatry—whether it be certain Israelites going rogue and constructing an altar to rival the true one in the tabernacle, or someone in our day who dilutes the gospel by minimizing the truth of what Christ has done for us by asserting other ways to God aside from him.

^[22] Hebrew, *ma’al*.

^[23] Exodus 20:22–26 gives instructions for the building of solitary altars that were not located in the tabernacle/temple, such as the one Joshua constructed on Mount Ebal, in accordance with the command of God in Deuteronomy 27:3–8. After the giving of the Law, these kinds of altars were built by Gideon (Judg 6:24–27), Manoah (Judg 13:15–20), Samuel (1 Sam 7:17), David (2 Sam 24:18), and Elijah (1 Kgs 18:30–35). Exodus 20:24 indicates that God must take the initiative in order for such “open-air” altars to be legitimate. Moreover, the only kinds of sacrifices to be offered on them were burnt offerings (Josh 8:31; Judg 6:26–27; 2 Sam 24:25), peace offerings (John 8:31; 2 Sam 24:25), and grain offerings (Judg 13:19). Atonement-making offerings (the sin and guilt offerings) are never mentioned in connection with solitary altars, because atonement could only be made in Israel’s central sanctuary. (Note: Burnt and grain offerings could be used for atonement, particularly when offered together, but this was not their main use. Sin and grain offerings were used exclusively for this purpose.) The apparent reason why the western tribes saw the altar of Joshua 22 as a threat is that it was clearly not a solitary open-air altar, all of which were to be made with uncut stone and filled with dirt. This altar, by way of contrast, was a “copy” (Heb. *tabnit*) of the one that was to stand only in the tabernacle.

^[24] First Peter 3:18.

^[25] John 4:24.

While Israel's response to the news of the altar doubtlessly seems harsh to us, it nevertheless displays their zeal to maintain faithfulness in their worship. They believed their brothers had sinned in a way that would have profound repercussions on the community as a whole. But this is balanced also by their desire to act justly. When they confront the eastern tribes, they don't merely condemn their actions, but they offer them a chance to repent, even going so far as offering them a share of their own inheritance to allow the eastern tribes to dwell with them:

But now, if the land of your possession is unclean, pass over into the LORD's land where the LORD's tabernacle stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us. Only do not rebel against the LORD or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the LORD our God (Josh 22:19).

Here we see biblical justice beautifully displayed, working in tandem with self-sacrificial love. The western tribes are willing to diminish their own inheritance, if that is what it takes to help their brothers turn from their sin and back into a harmonious relationship with them and the Lord.

Fortunately, the intention of the tribes east of the Jordan was never to actually use the altar, but rather that it would stand as a witness to remind future generations that they belong to the Lord just as much as their kinsmen living in the west. Israel's leadership is satisfied with this explanation, and return peacefully to their inheritance.

CHAPTER 9 QUESTIONS

Based on Scripture, how would you define worship? How would you define justice?

What are some ways that our culture twists the ideas of worship and justice?

Consider what you learned about the role of the Levites in this lesson. In what ways can your life and ministry be patterned after theirs?

Israel's laws governing killing are given in this lesson as an example of the way God's people need to think about justice with nuance, compassion, and impartiality. What are some contemporary challenges that are in need of this kind of moral clarity?

The western tribes care so much about purity of worship that they are willing to go to war against the eastern tribes for what they (mis)understand to be an altar set up in competition with the true one in the tabernacle. Obviously, physical force should never be the Christian's response to false worship, but perhaps their level of conviction casts light on how little we sometimes care about deviant worship. How seriously do you take your own worship? What can you do to show greater reverence the God of the universe who purchased you with the blood of his Son?



JOSHUA 23-24

CHAPTER 10:

GOD'S

GREAT WORKS

WHILE IT IS TRUE that spiritual growth is ultimately the work of the Spirit of God, the human heart needs spiritual discipline and nourishment in order to flourish, just as a garden requires careful tending to yield its beauty and fruit. Christian maturity happens as a result of God working through our efforts. It is not automatic, and those who treat it as if it is will eventually wither and fade, having fallen back into joyless conformity with the world.

The Lord graciously provides us with the tools we need to grow in Christ. But many of us fail to use them because we don't see them as practical or expedient. We often neglect or forget the knowledge he has given us of his great works, both in our lives and in history. How many of us would be able to give a coherent account of the many concrete ways God has shown us his love and his goodness? How often do we reduce him to a far off stranger, rather than a loving Father whose power is constantly at work in us? This is what happens when we neglect the stories he has given us in favor of quick, pragmatic answers that have the allure of efficiency. Nevertheless, we need to have a deep knowledge of God's works in human history, both because we are called, as a community, to reflect these things to an unbelieving world, and because it is the source of our trust in him for the future.

In Romans 15:4, Paul writes, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Putting conscious effort into knowing what God has done is like spreading fertilizer onto the soil of our hearts. It is good and right to ponder God's attributes—his holiness, love, righteousness, knowledge, and power. But if we do not root these in the ways they manifest themselves in our lives and in history, then he will seem distant to us, because we are ignoring the many ways in which he is close. We should be ready and willing to tell of how God has worked in our lives, and we should love his Word enough to be able to know what he has done throughout biblical history. This forms the backbone of a true relationship with him, and a heart that sings, with David, "I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds."¹¹

The book of Joshua teaches us what God is like by telling us what he has done. This is to help us see, again in the words of Paul from Romans, "the kindness and the severity of God."¹² There is simply no way to read Joshua without being confronted with both these things—the kindness that God shows to those who love and fear him (even to "pagans" like Rahab), as well as the severity of his judgment toward those who forsake him and follow after the gods of this world. There is a time when we need to hear about each of these, and that is evident from the ways Joshua uses these stories in the closing chapters of the book that bears his name.

TWO STORIES

Joshua addressed Israel's leadership in two farewell speeches towards the end of his life.¹³ The first of these, recorded in chapter 23, recounts what the Lord had done for Israel during the lifetime of the hearers, especially in driving out the Canaanites and giving them the land as their new home. The second speech, which takes up most of chapter 24, draws on their more distant history, from the time of Abraham up to the present. For the impatient reader, this might seem like needless repetition. Didn't we just read about this? And if I wanted to review all that other stuff, I'd just read Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers! Yet Joshua chooses this as the substance of his final speeches because he understands how important it will be for his people to remember.

As his life draws to a close, Joshua is under no delusion that there will be a hard road ahead for his people, and so he urges them, and their future generations, to remain faithful and to trust in the Lord to give them the remainder of the land, protecting them from Canaanite religious influences

Footnotes:

¹¹ Psalm 9:1.

¹² Romans 11:22.

¹³ In both, special mention is made of Israel's "elders," "heads," "judges," and "officers" (23:2; 24:1).



Shechem

Shechem is located at a site called Tell Balāṭah, in a narrow pass between the towering mountains Ebal and Gerezim. It enjoys an ample underground water supply that can be reached by wells and is surrounded by soil that is excellent for agriculture and the mountains that are ideal for grazing.

and from the military attacks that would continue throughout their history. In such times, he warns, the temptation will be to turn to their own resources and to treat their commitment to the Lord as mere formality. Would they take the Lord seriously, or not? The answer will depend, in large part, on how clearly they remember his works. That is why his exhortations in both speeches are couched in short narratives of Israel's past experiences of God. "You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you" (23:3). The victories they have experienced had all been in response to their faithfulness to him (vv. 8–10). At the same time, however,

... just as all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the LORD your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given you (vv. 15–16).¹⁴¹

In chapter 24, the use of history to inspire both trust and godly fear in the future is amplified by the location of the speech. Joshua gathers Israel's leadership to Shechem, the very place where God first promised to give the land to Abraham's descendants.¹⁴² Standing in this historic place, he traces their roots from when their fathers "served other gods beyond the River" (24:2)¹⁴³, all the way down to the recent conquest of the land, mentioning key events, such as the plagues, the exodus, and Balaam's blessing. These stories are highlighted because they show God's commitment to bless Israel in spite of the opposition of stronger enemies. Even their present standing is connected to the fulfilled promises of God: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant" (v. 13; cf. Deut 6:10–11). Once again, this is used as the foundation of the appeal to continue serving the Lord.

The reason why it is important for God's people to have a clear picture of the specific ways he has worked in our lives, as well as in biblical history, is because it builds our faith to both fear and trust him in the future. Our knowledge of what he has done gives us confidence that he will do what he has promised in the future. Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The more we see how he has been faithful in the past, the more courageously we can live with that day in view, knowing that if we trust in Christ as our Savior we will find ourselves face to face, not with judgment for our sin, but rather the embrace of a loving Father, who justifies the ungodly on the basis of our faith in Christ. It is this confidence that allows us to live fearlessly today in a world that is hostile to God's children.

CULTIVATING A GODLY HEART

The exhortations Joshua gives to his people in his final two speeches also show us what we are supposed to do with our understanding of how he has worked in our lives and in history. Above all else, our knowledge of the Lord needs to generate a profound and lasting love for him. Every true act of faith springs from this. The commandments that appear in 23:6–7, to keep his law and to avoid mixing with the nations, are futile if they do not come from hearts that treasure him. Without this, our obedience slides into miserable legalism, and we end up resenting all our feeble efforts to place distance between us and sinful influences. When we remove sin, we are left with a gaping hole in the center of our being, and it will not be long before other things rush in to fill it, as we trade our discarded idols for newer, shinier ones. That is why Joshua follows his commands by telling the people, "But you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day" (v. 8). This is the same Hebrew verb that is used in Genesis 2:24, when we learn of how a man must cling to his wife, as well as in Ruth, when the heroine of the story clings to her new mother-in-law after the premature loss of her husband.¹⁴⁴ Real spiritual growth is the passionate pursuit of God and the cultivation of hearts that love him. Only in this way can we serve the Lord "in sincerity and faithfulness" (Josh 24:14).

But love in the abstract is not enough. When a husband loves his wife, for example, he is not content to keep his affection

¹⁴¹ The threat of verse 15, that God will bring "all the evil things" upon Israel if they prove unfaithful, should not be understood as God committing moral evil (i.e., sin) against them. While the word can certainly have such connotations (e.g., the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2 and 3), it is often used in a morally neutral way, roughly meaning calamity, trouble, or harm. It is even used to describe certain animals as "wild" (Ezek 5:17; 14:15, 21). See David W. Baker, "רעע," in NIDOTTE 3:1154.

¹⁴² David M. Howard, *Joshua*, NAC 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 429–430.

¹⁴³ Here "the River" refers to the Euphrates, as it also does, for example, in Genesis 31:21; 36:37; 1 Kings 5:4; 14:15; Jeremiah 2:18; Micah 7:12; Zechariah 9:10.

¹⁴⁴ Ruth 1:14.

locked up in his heart, expressing his feelings only in kind words and symbolic gestures. He goes beyond this by doing what fills her with joy, and he knows what those things are because he has spent time getting to know her. Similarly, Joshua laid out the path of faithfulness by setting before his people a challenge almost identical to the one that was given to him years earlier when he was raised up as their leader: “Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left” (23:6; cf. 1:7). The way we express our love for God is by striving to do what he asks of us, by living under the instruction of the Scriptures. For Israel, that meant ordering their society after the pattern of righteousness set forth for them in the commandments given to Moses. We are in a much better position to do this today, because whereas “the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”^[8] “In these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son,”^[9] and in the power of the Holy Spirit we have the incredible privilege of knowing the fullness of God’s revelation to us, both in the complete Scriptures, and supremely in Jesus, whom we find there.

THE KEY INGREDIENT

This is our supreme need. Apart from Christ, we have no hope of leading lives that are pleasing to God. Though he had little knowledge of God’s ultimate plan of salvation in Jesus, Joshua shows his awareness of this during the final covenant renewal in chapter 24. Here, the people once again enthusiastically commit themselves to following the Lord with their whole hearts, after the brave example of Joshua. “Far be it from us,” they proclaim, “that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods. . . . Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God” (v. 16). To this Joshua gives the surprising reply, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins” (v. 19). And he goes on to set as witnesses against the people both their own testimony, as well as a memorial stone placed under a terebinth tree.

Why did Joshua respond to their well-intentioned commitment with such pessimism? It is because he knows three things about the God whom they profess to serve—he is holy, he is jealous, and he will not forgive their transgressions. As we saw in lesson three, God’s holiness refers to his radically transcendent moral perfection. The problem is that the sin-infected human mind can never attain what God requires of us, what Paul later calls “the righteous requirement of the Law.”^[10] We can know all God’s commandments backwards and forwards, but we are unable to do them. This problem is amplified by the so-called “jealousy” of God. Unlike human jealousy, which is virtually synonymous with covetousness, God’s jealousy is his zeal for his holiness and for his people’s affection.^[11] God is said to be jealous for us, not in that he wants something that doesn’t belong to him, but because all things do belong to him and he alone is worthy of our worship.^[12] Our propensity to give our hearts to things other than him is what provokes his jealousy.

But what about the third point made in verse 19 by Joshua, that “he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins”? Doesn’t this fly in the face of God’s love and mercy that stand so central to his character, not just to how he is portrayed in the New Testament (for example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15), but in the Old Testament as well? God’s willingness to forgive his people is central to who he is. He is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin.”^[13] The danger that Joshua is exposing is not that God would refuse to be true to his character, but that, by failing to truly repent of their sins, Israel would not be able to experience forgiveness. Essentially, they would fail to meet the conditions eloquently expressed in passages like 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” When God holds us to account for our sin, it is not because he is unwilling to forgive, but because we are hard-hearted, unbelieving, and do not truly desire a reconciled relationship with him.

Despite the incredible record of Israel’s faithfulness to walk in the light of the Lord, and of God’s willingness to be with his

^[8] John 1:17.

^[9] Hebrews 1:2.

^[10] Romans 8:4.

^[11] We might wonder if “jealousy” is even the best concept to translate this expression from the Hebrew, where the original word (*qin’â* and its cognates) does not have the same connotations as it does in English.

^[12] This is the justification given for the second commandment in Exodus 20:4–6. God’s jealousy means that he does not tolerate the worship of idols.

^[13] Exodus 34:6–7.

people as their strength, the book of Joshua ends with a sense of grim foreboding about the nation's future. Apparently, the generation that heard Joshua's words took them to heart, and "served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the LORD did for Israel" (24:31). But we need only turn a few pages to the book of Judges to find out what happened after that. The combined biblical testimony of the impending dark chapters in the history of Israel leaves us with a painful awareness of the inability of humanity to redeem itself from the curse of sin and death. Neither God's law, nor their powerful leaders, nor even God's favor was enough to realize the purpose of God in overcoming human evil, something that would only be realized in Christ:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it^[14]—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.^[15]

^[14] In the Jewish Scriptures, the "Prophets" refers also to the Old Testament historical books, including Joshua.

^[15] Romans 3:21–26.

CHAPTER 10 QUESTIONS

What are some biblical events that you need to know better than you do?

Name five times God has worked in your life as a testimony of his faith and goodness to you.

If you had a hard time with either of the last two questions, why do you think that is?

In the quote from Romans 11:22, Paul notes the importance of reflecting both on God’s “kindness” and his “severity.” Why are both of these important?

Which one of these do you tend towards in your thinking, and what can you do to balance them better?

In this lesson, we mention that our desire to follow God’s commands needs to be driven by a sincere love for Christ. What do you do to keep Jesus central in your heart? What more can you do?

APPENDIX: JOSHUA'S WARS OF CONQUEST

God's commands for the Israelites to wage war against the Canaanites present one of the most difficult ethical questions for Christians who believe that the Scriptures are the revealed Word of God. These commands are carried out in the book of Joshua, and can cause deep conflict between the theological and devotional truths taught in the stories on the one hand, and the historical reality of what it must have been like when the invading Israelite forces put the land's inhabitants to the sword on the other. Many honest observers have wondered how the God who loved the world by sending his Son to die for us could also have commanded violence against an entire population of people.^[1]

There are no simple and easy answers to this question, but our aim here is to try to provide a biblical framework for thinking about the moral challenges that face us as we read the book of Joshua. These questions are not new, and people of faith have wrestled with them throughout the centuries. Of the many answers that have been offered, some are more satisfactory than others, and often depend on one's prior theological convictions (or lack thereof). As followers of Jesus, we believe that the proper posture for approaching this issue is encapsulated in Anselm of Canterbury's famous and wise motto, "faith seeking understanding." That is, we have many good reasons to believe in and trust the God of the Bible. And so, problems that seem challenging to us should be treated with diligence, patience, and open-mindedness, as well as the understanding that they do not somehow cancel out the positive reasons we have for believing in God and his goodness. Any realistic view of God must acknowledge that there are many aspects of him that are simply beyond human understanding. We therefore approach these questions in view of the wisdom given by God through the prophet Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."^[2]

THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM

The challenge we are addressing is raised by texts such as Deuteronomy 7:1–5:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction [Heb. *haḥārēm taḥārīm 'ōtām*]. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

This is carried out by the Israelite forces in the book of Joshua. The summary of the battle of Jericho's outcome stands as an

Footnotes:

^[1]This important issue has been treated at length in many publications. The most thorough and rigorous work of which we are aware is Paul Copan and Matthew Flannigan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014). A shorter version can be found in chapters 15–17 of Copan's earlier work, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

^[2] Isaiah 55:19.

example: “Then they devoted all in the city to destruction [*wayyahārimū*], both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword” (Josh 6:21).^[5]

A key biblical term used in both these passages, and others like them, is the Hebrew noun *herem*, which is typically translated as “ban” or “devoted to destruction” (its related verb *hāram* occurs in the passages cited above).^[6] This concept belongs to Israel’s ritual vocabulary alongside familiar terminology like “holy”/“common,” and “clean”/“unclean,” and indicates things that are irrevocably dedicated to the Lord. John P. Lilly describes it the idea as “uncompromising consecration without possibility of recall or redemption.”^[6] Accordingly, valuable objects were to be given to the sanctuary, and people and objects defiled by sin were to be destroyed.^[6] The Canaanite people and culture were utterly corrupt and evil, and had defiled the land that God had set apart as holy for his people. The idea of enemies and the spoils of war coming under a ban was not unique to Israel, and is attested also in texts from the eighteenth century BC in city of Mari,^[7] as well as the Mesha Stele, a monumental text dating to 840 BC in which a Moabite king recounts his version of the events surrounding 2 Kings 3, including the claim that he “devoted to destruction” (*hhrmth*) the Israelite town of Nebo to his god, Ashtar-Kemosh.^[8] It isn’t surprising that we find this ideology of warfare throughout the ancient world. But how does it square with the God of the Bible? In order to get on the right track, let us first specify the nature of the problem.

A helpful place to begin is by asking, does the Bible teach that God has the right to take human life? The answer is yes. God, of course, will eventually conquer death itself.^[9] But until then, all human beings meet the same fate, even though Christ enables us to face it with hope. Some people die quickly and painlessly while others suffer long ordeals before passing. And if it is true, as the Bible teaches, that God is sovereignly in control of every aspect of our lives, then death is no exception. We find this explicitly taught in Deuteronomy 32:39: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” Biblical teaching is unequivocal: It is the will of God that all people eventually die physical death, and he is the one who decides when that will happen.^[10] The life God gives is a gift, and he wrongs no one when he, in his wisdom, decides to take it eventually from every single one of us.

Moreover, death is a consequence of human sin. As Paul teaches in Romans 5:12, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” And then, a chapter later, we read that “the wages of sin is death.”^[11] James also tells us, “Sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”^[12] While it is certainly true that death can be used to describe our state of alienation from God,^[13] the connection between spiritual death and physical death as a result of sin cannot be overlooked.^[14] God would be just in the taking of life even if this were not the case, but he is more justified in doing so given that it is.

If God, then, is justified in ending human life, in virtue of both his sovereignty and his justice, it is difficult to see how biblical accounts of him carrying this out should be viewed as problematic. This is true even if God does a lot of it at once, such as in the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or his judgment on the Canaanites. To be sure, the pictures painted in these stories are not pleasant; death rarely is. But if we accept the fact that God has the right to take life, and especially to do

^[5] Also Joshua 7:21–29; 10:28–43; 11:10–15, 19–23.

^[6] In the Hebrew Old Testament the verb occurs 51 times and the noun occurs 29 times.^[5] J. P. U. Lilley, “Understanding the *Herem*,” Tyndale Bulletin 44.1 (1993): 76–77.

^[6] Leviticus 27:28–29.

^[7] Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1984 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 70–79. In Mari, the term used for this concept is *asakkum*.

^[8] K. A. D. Smelik, “The Inscription of King Mesha,” in *Context of Scripture Volume 2: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; Leiden: Brill, 2003), § 2.23. Reflecting the ritual nature of this term, Smelik translates it, “killed as a sacrifice.” Younger notes even more extreme versions of this idea in Assyrian texts, such as the Annals of Aššur-nasir-pal II: “I made a pile of their corpses. I burned their young boys (and) girls. I flayed Hulaya, their city ruler; (and) I draped his skin over the wall of the city of Dandammusa. I razed, destroyed, (and) burned the city” (cited in K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* [LHBOTS 98; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 236).

^[9] Isaiah 25:8; 1 Corinthians 15:54–55; Hebrews 2:14–15; Revelation 20:14; 21:4.

^[10] Notwithstanding the exception of those in Christ who are alive at his coming (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17).

^[11] Romans 6:23.

^[12] James 1:15.

^[13] Luke 15:24; Ephesians 2:1, 5; 4:18.

^[14] For example, Genesis 5.

so as judgement for sin, then biblical depictions of him doing this present no real challenge to Christian faith, as emotionally difficult as this may seem to us. We should also note that God's attitude towards his judgment of sinners is in no way sadistic delight, but rather grief: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?"¹¹⁵¹

In light of these considerations, the real difficulty posed by the destruction of the Canaanites is not that it was the Lord's will to judge them with death. Rather, it is that he commanded humans to carry this out. While God is justified in taking human life, under most circumstances humans are not. One major reason why murder is wrong, under a biblical worldview, is that it robs God of a right that belongs only to him—the right to decide when to give and take life. It is not God's will that human beings should exert this kind of power over one another. Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna observes, "By his unspeakable act, the murderer usurps the divine prerogative and infringes upon God's sovereignty; and, because human beings are created in the divine image, he also affronts God's majesty."¹¹⁶¹ Although murder is certainly a crime against the victim, it is even more so a sin against God. This is why David, after killing Bathsheba's husband Uriah, can pray in repentance, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."¹¹⁷¹

On the other hand, the Bible also teaches that God authorizes humans to take life under certain circumstances. Such circumstances would include punishment for capital crimes like murder^[18] or enslavement/slave-trading,^[19] justified warfare, and other acts that are protective in nature.^[20] When human beings do such things, they are acting as God's agents.^[21] Therefore, a biblical perspective on killing would be something like the following: Intentional killing is sin except when it is not authorized or commanded by God. The narratives of Israel's war against the Canaanites fall within these parameters, because, as we have seen, they were acting in obedience to several commands given to them in the law of Moses (as the text explicitly says three times in Joshua 11:12–20).

Thus far, we have these two observations:

- (1) God is justified in his taking of human life, both because of his sovereignty and his righteousness in judgment.
- (2) Human beings are justified in taking life when doing so in accordance with God's commands.¹²²¹

Both these points are thoroughly biblical, and show that, given a Scriptural worldview, there is no true theological problem raised by the killing of the Canaanites.

One possible objection to this, however, would be to pit God's portrayal in the Old Testament against his revelation in Christ in the New. Those who argue along these lines are correct to point out that there is a sense in which revelation is progressive. Things that are not clear or perhaps not revealed in earlier stages of redemptive history are revealed and become clearer in Christ. But some have taken this further, and have argued the Old Testament endorses a false view of God. Christians who think this way will usually suggest the Bible is a record, not of God's revelation to us, but of our developing understanding of him.¹²³¹

¹¹⁵¹ Ezekiel 18:23; also v. 32; 33:11; Genesis 6:6; Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Timothy 2:3–4; 2 Peter 3:9.

¹¹⁶¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 113.

¹¹⁷¹ Psalm 51:4.

¹¹⁸¹ Exodus 21:12–14; Leviticus 24:17–23; Numbers 35:9–34.

¹¹⁹¹ Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7.

¹²⁰¹ There are, of course, other sins/crimes that were considered capital offenses in the Old Testament. Regarding the justness of killing for protective purposes, consider that slavery, fascism, Nazism, and Soviet communism were all defeated through military force.

¹²¹¹ The Bible contains other examples of people acting as God's agents in judgment. The Assyrian armies were sent against the Northern Kingdom of Israel as a judgment for their sins (2 Kings 17:6–18; Isaiah 10:5–19), as were the Babylonians against Judah (Jeremiah 21:1–10). One big difference between these nations and the Israelites under Joshua is that the Israelites were acting out of obedience to the Lord, while the Assyrians and the Babylonians were acting out of their own sinful ambition, and were themselves judged accordingly. Nevertheless, in all three cases, God used human warfare to judge sin.

¹²²¹ If this latter point seems harsh, consider that most people believe killing is justified in certain circumstances, irrespective of religious considerations (e.g., capital punishment, justified warfare).

¹²³¹ Examples would include Eric Seibert, Brian Zahnd, and Gregory Boyd. There are, of course, others who would argue that the task of modern theology is to continue to correct the primitive views of God found even in the New Testament.

Space does not permit us to explore these different proposals to the extent they deserve, but we hope it is sufficient to note that such views do not take seriously enough the way Jesus and the New Testament writers affirm the Old Testament portrayal of God, even, and explicitly, with respect to the violence depicted in Joshua. Stephen, in his speech before being martyred in Acts 7, speaks approvingly of Joshua’s “dispossession” of the Canaanite peoples, attributing it to the work of God: he “drove them out before our fathers.”¹²⁴¹ Paul also, in his address to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, says that God was the one who “destroyed” the inhabitants of the land and “gave [it to Israel] as an inheritance.”¹²⁵¹ Hebrews 11 praises the Old Testament military leaders explicitly for “conquering kingdoms.”¹²⁶¹ All three of these passages treat Joshua’s military victories approvingly and attribute them to the work of God.

As Christians, our starting point should be how Jesus himself thought of the Old Testament. All indications show that he viewed it as the true Word of God, such that to believe or disbelieve the Scriptures was to believe or disbelieve God.¹²⁷¹ Neither Jesus nor the New Testament authors give the impression that the Old Testament is in need of correction. In fact, New Testament theology is grounded in the foundations established in the Old.

God’s attributes should not be placed at odds with one another, as if any of them undermines the others. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly loving, present everywhere, perfectly just, and completely sovereign. All of these are aspects of his holiness. Properly understood, these attributes complement one another and give us an accurate portrait of who God has revealed himself to be in all the Scriptures, nuanced and multitextured as they are. The love of God shown in Jesus Christ is magnified by the seriousness with which he judges sin. Only the life of the divine Son has the infinite value required to vindicate the holiness of the God of the Old Testament in his justification of sinners.

In sum, the Bible gives us a theologically consistent way of thinking about Joshua’s wars of conquest. God is justified in commanding war against the Canaanites, and the Israelites are justified in carrying out those commands. Nevertheless, we are likely left with a feeling that there is still something morally disturbing about both the commands and the stories. And for good reason. The violent taking of life should never sit easily with any morally serious thinker, let alone for those of us who believe that all human beings bear the image of God. More can and should be said, not least of all because these observations do not tell us the full story. We now turn to these additional considerations, all of which should inform our thinking.

A STORY FROM A DIFFERENT TIME

In the prologue to his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*, the British author L. P. Hartley famously wrote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”¹²⁸¹ This encapsulates our first observation, which is simple, yet important for anyone doing serious thinking about historical matters. In some very fundamental ways, humanity will always be the same, and Ecclesiastes 1:5 will always be true: “There is nothing new under the sun.” The essential elements that make us who we are will always be relevant—we will always bear the image of God, and we will always be twisted by sin and other shortcomings, yet also beautiful in the many ways we reflect our Creator. But there are other ways in which we are drastically shaped by the times and places into which we are born. Things that seem obvious, both morally and intellectually, to one group, will seem strange and even repulsive to others. It is natural to think that all people everywhere would be evil or ignorant to not see things as we do. But doing so virtually guarantees that we will misunderstand cultures that are different than our own.

Before making judgments about the characters and scenarios presented in the Bible, we must make every effort to check our cultural biases at the door. With respect to the book of Joshua, the nearly 3,250 years that separate us from the people we read about should caution us about assuming what we would do if we were in their situation. We live on the other side of countless events in human history that have molded and shaped the world around us. And not a single one of us—even our best historians—truly knows what it would have been like to live in an ancient Near Eastern tribal society, whether Israelite, Canaanite, Philistine, Egyptian, Phoenician, or the countless other groups that existed at the time. This is not to say that the Scriptures withhold judgment on the characters that populate its narratives; far from it. But it does mean that our intellectual and moral compasses have very limited value in a world so vastly unlike our own.

¹²⁴¹ Acts 7:45.

¹²⁵¹ Acts 13:19.

¹²⁶¹ Hebrews 11:32–34.

¹²⁷¹ Matthew 4:4; 19:4–6; 22:41–45; Mark 7:9–13; John 10:35–36; 17:17.

¹²⁸¹ L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).

DID GOD REALLY SAY?

The events of September 11, 2001 forced our society to open its eyes to the reality of religious extremism, including the fact that a small yet significant percentage of the world's population believes that their god has given them a mandate to kill people. In what way are the beliefs that drive this mentality different from those possessed by the Israelites as they entered into Canaan and went to war with its inhabitants? After all, both believed they were acting according to divine directives.

The fact that people often do mistakenly believe that they are following the commands of deities is a reality that the Bible takes very seriously. In fact, Scripture's insistence on monotheistic faith stands in stark contrast to the polytheism that was prevalent in the ancient world, the latter of which accepted the reality of foreign deities and imagined a world in which the gods of certain nations were merely subservient to the gods of others. By way of contrast, the Bible teaches that other gods are false, and that those who follow them are self-deluded, merely worshiping the works of their own hands.^[29] God's verbal revelation in both the Old and New Testaments functions against this backdrop.^[30]

This provides the context for much of what we see in the stories of Israel's early years, where God often seems intent on leaving no room for doubt that the revelation given through Moses was indeed from him. God judged Egypt through ten plagues.^[31] He led them through the wilderness with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.^[32] He parted the Sea of Reeds, destroying the Egyptian force that pursued them.^[33] He sustained them with bread from heaven,^[34] water,^[35] and quail,^[36] as well as unambiguous military help.^[37] He visibly and audibly manifested himself on Mount Sinai.^[38] Moses' face visibly glowed after being with God.^[39] The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle once it had been consecrated.^[40] Both Miriam and Aaron's opposition^[41] and the rebellion of Korah^[42] were aimed squarely at the question of Moses as the exclusive mouthpiece of God, and both were met with swift and extraordinary divine judgment. Of all the tribal leaders, God showed his favor on Aaron by causing his staff to bud.^[43] God sent fiery serpents as judgment against the people's grumbling, and authorized Moses alone to provide the remedy,^[44] and he sent a plague on his people for worshipping Baal Peor, which abated only after Aaron's son Phineas took action.^[45] And even as the people moved into the land, God's presence was confirmed by him parting the waters of the Jordan^[46] and his miraculous interventions in several key battles.^[47] Additionally, the authority of Moses is publicly passed on to Joshua, assuring that Israel would follow him as they had followed Moses.^[48]

While each of these blatantly miraculous acts had purposes of its own, they both also served the function of eliminating any reasonable doubt as to whether their God was real and what he had commanded them. It is probably no exaggeration to say that there were no atheists among these generations of Israelites. Their belief or unbelief rested squarely on their hardness of heart, not on any purported lack of evidence. This stands in extreme contrast with the violent Islamic jihadist, whose only

^[29] Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:2; Isaiah 44:8–20; 45:5–7, 18, 21–22; Joel 2:27.

^[30] First Corinthians 8:4; 1 Timothy 2:5.

^[31] Exodus 7–12.

^[32] Exodus 13:17–22; Numbers 10:11–35.

^[33] Exodus 14.

^[34] Exodus 16.

^[35] Exodus 17:1–7; Numbers 20:2–13.

^[36] Numbers 11:31–35.

^[37] Exodus 17:8–16; Numbers 21:1–3, 21–35.

^[38] Exodus 19:16–20; 20:18–21; 24:9–18.

^[39] Exodus 34:29–35.

^[40] Exodus 40:34–38.

^[41] Numbers 12.

^[42] Numbers 16.

^[43] Numbers 17.

^[44] Numbers 21:4–9.

^[45] Numbers 25.

^[46] Joshua 3.

^[47] Joshua 6; 10:1–15.

^[48] Numbers 27:12–23; Joshua 1:5, 16–18.

theological justification for his actions is an interpretation of the Qur'an, which itself was given in private settings to Muhammad. The primary reason for objecting the Muslim extremist worldview is that those who believe it are deceived—their god does not exist, he has not spoken, and they do not have adequate justification for their dangerous beliefs. None of these things can be said of the Israelites. In fact, with only very few exceptions throughout redemptive history, few people who have ever lived have had stronger warrant for their knowledge about God, including what he required of them.

THE MYTH OF PEACEFUL ADVERSARIES

We should not miss the fact that all modern Western critics of the early Israelite wars do so from the context of the most safe and secure societies the world has ever known. Most of us do not know what it is to live under constant physical threat to us, our families, and our livelihoods. Anyone who has read the Old Testament knows that war and the terrors that it brought were a real possibility at any and all times. Can we truly imagine what it would have been like to be homeless escaped slaves entering into a land filled with hostile city states that wouldn't have hesitated to kill our men, rape our women, and make slaves of our survivors?

And this was, in fact, what Israel encountered. In the wilderness, having escaped the Egyptian army, Israel fell under almost immediate attack from Amalekite raiders.^[49] Recounting this, Deuteronomy 25:18 reminds God's people of how Amalek purposely targeted their weak: "He attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God."^[50] Years later, as Israel attempted to move northward into the Transjordan, the king of Edom refused to give them passage, and even came out with "a large army and with a strong force" to stop them.^[51] Soon after this, Israel was attacked again by the king of the Canaanite city of Arad, who "fought against Israel and took some of them captive."^[52] Matters did not improve as Israel moved even further north and were attacked by two different Amorite kings, Sihon and Og.^[53]

According to the accounts of Joshua, many of the battles fought within Canaan were not initiated by the Israelite forces either. After the Israelites attacked Jericho and Ai, they faced a coalition of southern kings who attacked Gibeon in order to draw Israel into battle due to their treaty obligations.^[54] In a summary statement, the text tells us, "There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon."^[55] Likewise, Jabin, king of Hazor, formed an alliance with several northern cities "and came out [against Israel] with all their troops, a great horde, in number like the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots."^[56]

None of this should be taken to mean that all of Israel's battles in the land of Canaan were defensive. We have already noted that Jericho and Ai were offensive, and the cities listed in Joshua 10:29–43 can be added to the list. Nor does it permit us to ignore the fact that Israel entered the land with the express purpose of driving out the native inhabitants. Had none of them attacked, Joshua would still have been divinely obligated to wage war against them. But these observations do allow us to more accurately assess the situation on the ground. These were not peaceful cities who would have been happy to welcome the tribes of Israel as their new neighbors. They were aggressors in their own right, ready to wage open war on God's people.

STATED PURPOSES

The Old Testament gives two primary stated reasons for God's commands for Israel to drive out the Canaanites. The first, which we have already noted, is that it was an act of judgment on the sinful city states within Canaan. Deuteronomy 9:4–5 is explicit:

Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, "It is because of my righteousness

[49] Exodus 17:8–16.

[50] Here the Amalekites are personified as an individual—a he.

[51] Numbers 20:20–21.

[52] Numbers 21:1–3. Arad is one of the cities later defeated in Joshua's southern campaign (Joshua 12:14).

[53] Numbers 21:21–35.

[54] Joshua 10:1–28.

[55] Joshua 11:19.

[56] Joshua 11:4. For the battle, see Joshua 11.

that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,” whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

God is not giving the Promised Land to Israel as a reward for their upstanding moral character. They are the merely recipients of the gracious promises given centuries earlier to their forefathers, and the inhabitants are being driven out because of their own wickedness. Several passages elaborate on this theme. Deuteronomy 18:9–14 lists deviant religious practices such as child sacrifice, omen reading, necromancy, and other divinatory rites.^[57] Leviticus 18 catalogs numerous sexual practices as “abominations” for which “the land vomited out its inhabitants.”^[58] To these, we would add the willingness of the Canaanite cities to wage war against the Israelites, noted in the previous section, as evidence of their hostility and disregard for vulnerable sojourners and foreigners.^[59]

Another important statement relevant to this point is made in Genesis 15, the passage where God formally established his covenant with Abraham.^[60] Here, God tells Abraham that the reason he brought him into Canaan was “to give [him] this land to possess.” But he also makes clear that this would not happen immediately. Rather, God told him of how his descendants would be “sojourners” and “servants in a land that is not theirs” for “four hundred years.” God ends this promise with the intriguing statement, “For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”^[61] Apparently, even then God was delaying his judgment on the Canaanites, knowing that their wickedness would eventually grow to a point of necessitating divine justice.^[62]

The second stated reason for driving out the Canaanites given in the biblical text is found in Deuteronomy 20:18: “. . . that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.” This is reiterated elsewhere in Deuteronomy 7:4, 12:30, and 18:9. The Israelites had already proven susceptible to idolatrous religious practices, as evidenced in their worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32 and of the Moabite deity Baal Peor in Numbers 25. And the rest of the history of Israel given to us in the Old Testament is a testimony to how frequently God’s people became corrupted by idolatrous worship. To this we should add what we see in our own lives, how easily our hearts turn aside from God to worship created things.

The critical question here is how important it is for God’s people to follow the first two of the Ten Commandments—do not place other gods before the Lord, and do not worship him through the use of idols. The way we answer this will greatly impact what we make of much of the violence in the Old Testament. If we feel that the abandonment of the Lord for the worship of

^[57] Here, child sacrifice is referred to as “making one’s son or daughter pass through the fire.” This is a common expression in the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35; Ezekiel 16:21; 20:26, 31; 23:37), and seems, both here and in 2 Kings 17:17 and 21:6, to be connected with divination. Elsewhere other expressions are used, such as in Deuteronomy 12:31, which speaks of Canaanites “burning their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.” The strongest archaeological evidence for child sacrifice is found in the Phoenician city of Carthage, where a massive 6,000 square meter burial ground of infants and children burned in sacrificial rituals has been excavated. It should be noted that Phoenician religion had many similarities to the religion of Canaan, and is often cited in scholarly literature as evidence for Canaanite beliefs and practices. Writing in the third century BC, the Greek author Kleitarchos describes the practice: “Out of reverence for Kronos [the Greek equivalent of Ba’al Hammon], the Phoenicians, and especially the Carthaginians, whenever they seek to obtain some great favor, woe one of their children, burning it as a sacrifice to the deity, if they are especially eager to gain success. There stands in their midst a bronze statue of Kronos, its hands extended over a bronze brazier, the flames of which engulf the child. When the flames fall upon the body, the limbs contract and the open mouth seems almost to be laughing, until the contracted [body] slips quietly into the brazier. Thus it is that the ‘grin’ is known as ‘sardonic laughter,’ since they die laughing” (P. G. Mosca, *Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion: A Study in Mulk and Molech* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1975), 22. For more details, see Lawrence E. Stager and Samuel R. Wolff, “Child Sacrifice at Carthage: Religious Rite or Population Control?” *BAR* 10.1 (1984): 30–51.

^[58] Leviticus 18:25.

^[59] During the period of the judges, the Canaanite military commander Sisera’s mother is portrayed as testifying to her son’s practice in war: “Have they not found and divided the spoil? A womb or two for every man” (Judges 5:29–30).

^[60] His name was Abram at this point.

^[61] Genesis 15:7–8, 13–16.

^[62] The term “Amorite,” which derives from the Sumerian *Martu* and the Akkadian *ammuru*, meaning “westerner,” is often used in the Bible to refer to non-Israelite “hill-dwellers,” and, as here, as a synecdoche referring to all Canaanites. See Tomoo Ishida, “The Structure and Historical Implications of the Lists of Pre-Israelite Nations,” *Biblica* 60 (1979): 461–90; Kevin G. O’Connell, “The List of Seven Peoples in Canaan,” in *The Answers Lie Below: Essays in Honor of Lawrence Edmund Toombs* (ed. A. G. Thompson; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 221–41.

other gods is no big deal, then we will probably view much of what we read in the Bible as a gross overreaction. However, according to the Bible, following these commandments, and the preservation of true worship of the one true God is of critical importance.

God's violent response to human sin is just that—he is responding to evil. Of course, the severity of any evil act depends on what makes an action moral or immoral, especially the degree of harm that is inflicted. If we accept the narrative of Scripture, that Israel is central to the plan of God to decisively counter the plague of sin that robs God of his glory and brings death and condemnation to everyone who has ever lived, then an individual or a community acting in willing opposition to that plan would be guilty of a very serious criminal act. The command to devote the Canaanites to destruction is given to protect God's chosen people from the idolatry that would have drawn Israel away from God (as it eventually did), and to judge sin. If we think little of these objectives, then we will have a very hard time coming to terms with what we find in the pages of Joshua. But if we accept what the Bible teaches, then this will have to enter into our calculation—that there was a time and place when God dealt visibly with unrepentant sin, and this should serve as a warning for all of us.

REFUSAL OF PEACE

As we noted in chapter 2 of this study, the nation of Israel was not a closed group that outsiders had no hope of joining. Several passages indicate clearly that people who were not descended from Abraham were to be welcomed into the covenant people, on the condition that they would embrace the Lord as their God. We see this in the “mixed multitude” that left Egypt along with the Israelites in Exodus 12:38, as well as other non-Israelites who were incorporated into the holy nation over the years, with Caleb the Kenizzite standing as a powerful example.

It is probably no coincidence that the very first Canaanite encountered in the land is Rahab, who turned to the Lord, was spared the fate of her city, and was welcomed into Israel. It is not unreasonable to assume that there may have been other individuals who did the same. Indeed, her story stands in juxtaposition to that of Achan, an Israelite who turned his heart away from God and was placed under the *herem* alongside the enemies of God. The Canaanites' unwillingness to turn from their sin and join Israel is also displayed in Joshua 11:19, where we are told that “there was not a city that made people with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon.” Thus we should not assume that the Canaanites who were killed in the wars of conquest had no choice but to be destroyed. Rather, they believed that their superior numbers, fortified cities, and military strength would enable them to continue in their sinful practices.

A NEW AND BETTER WAY^[63]

It is not uncommon for Christians to be accused of cherry-picking the Bible—focusing on the parts we like and avoiding those that we don't. This is indeed a problem in the church, especially among those who don't consistently read through their Bibles. This results in a lopsided view of God and a faith that is ill-equipped to stand up to challenges and personal struggles. So let's get it out of the way: We all need to cherry-pick less.

But are we cherry-picking when we follow the loving pattern of Jesus and the early church, rather than violent examples in the Old Testament, such as we find in the book of Joshua? (This is not to say that there are not loving parts in the Old Testament, or wrathful parts in the New.) Not at all, because the Bible itself teaches a distinction between what God was doing in the Old Testament and what he is doing in the New. Jesus' disciples are not bound by the Old Covenant, or by the law that governed God's people under it. When Christians eat shellfish, get tattoos, and grow cucumbers alongside asparagus and Carolina Reaper peppers, we are not doing so simply because we have chosen to ignore the parts of the Bible that we don't like.

To the contrary, the reason why we do not observe these laws, or deal with idolatry the way Israel did (when it chose to deal with it), is because the Bible itself teaches us that Christians are no longer under the jurisdiction of the Law of Moses—the law that provided moral guidance for ancient Israel between twelve and fourteen hundred years before the coming of Christ. This law, which was the ethical standard for the Old Covenant, was given to govern a specific people, at a specific time, under

[63] This section is adapted from our previous essay, “Violence in the Elijah and Elisha Stories.”

specific circumstances, at a specific point in God’s overall plan of redemption—all of which are different than our own.

According to the New Testament, Christians are under the New Covenant in Christ.^[651] The Old Covenant law, therefore, is not the Christian’s master; Jesus is. This is why Paul can stand as “not being myself under the law” (that is, the law of Moses), “but under the law of Christ.”^[651] This is also why the early church, faced with the question of whether to require Gentile converts to submit to the law of Moses, had the freedom to conclude that doing so would be “putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.” To the contrary, Peter contended, “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”^[661]

The New Covenant is “not like the covenant that [the Lord] made with [Israel’s] forefathers on the day when [he] took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.”^[671] As the writer of Hebrews puts it, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”^[681] There is a legitimate biblical difference between the ethic required by those in Jesus’ kingdom and that which was required of the ancient Israelites.

Much more could be said about the relationship between Old Testament law and the Christian. For example, none of this means that Old Testament laws, such as the Ten Commandments, have no relevance for the Christian life. The principles that lie behind the letter of the law are relevant for all of God’s people at all times. Our task with these laws is to discern these principles and to let them inform our conduct in light of the coming of Christ. Our point here is simply to state that it would actually be unbiblical for Christians to engage in the kind of violence found in the Old Testament laws and stories, because God’s mission for the church is different than it was for Israel. As the church, we are not a political entity with an earthly king, requiring our spiritual leaders to use military force to defend and preserve our religious life. We aren’t called to inhabit a land, but are rather called out from every land. And, unlike Israel, our spiritual wellbeing doesn’t stand or fall on the religious policies of any particular government.

APPROACHING THESE MATTERS WITH UNBELIEVERS

We live in a day when one no longer needs to read the Bible, or any book for that matter, in order to find reasons to reject Jesus. A myriad of skeptical sources awaits anyone with Google and a pulse. And the topic addressed here will be at the top of the list of anyone looking for moral problems in the Bible. Our hope is that the information provided here would prove helpful to those encountering such objections. But we would also remind the Christian seeking to witness to his or her unbelieving friends that these questions are not of “first importance.” Although they may be encountered as roadblocks to belief, we must remember that providing answers to them that unbelievers will find morally satisfying should not be thought of as a necessary prerequisite for sharing the gospel, as if the truthfulness of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the forgiveness found in him, somehow depends on cracking the moral dilemmas of the Old Testament. For this reason, we recommend refocusing unbelieving friends and family members on the critical question of the gospel, and realizing that the matters covered in these pages are best handled from Anselm’s perspective, mentioned at the outset, of faith seeking understanding.

^[651] Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:5–6; Hebrews 7:22.

^[652] 1 Corinthians 9:20–21.

^[661] Acts 15:5, 10–11. The conclusion of this “Jerusalem Council” was to require the Gentiles to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, blood, what has been strangled, and from fornication (Acts 15:28–29). Although the reason these four things were chosen is debated, the most likely explanation is that they reflect the stipulations of Leviticus 17–18 for Gentiles living within ancient Israel. See Richard J. Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting (The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting 4*; ed. Richard J. Bauckham; Exeter: Paternoster; 1995), 459–60; James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles (Epworth Commentaries*; London: Epworth, 1996), 204; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul and the Early Church (Early Christian Mission 2*; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 1015–19.

^[671] Jeremiah 31:32.

^[681] Hebrews 8:13; also Romans 11:27.