

Sermon Summary #8

Joshua and the Slaughter of the Canaanites Joshua 6:21; 8:24-29; 11:10-15

Preaching through the Bible, verse-by-verse, has both its advantages and its disadvantages. The advantages are obvious: It exposes us to what the apostle Paul referred to as “the whole counsel of God.” It enables us to see the richness and depth and extent of God’s revelation. Nothing is left out. The disadvantages are no less obvious: It compels us to deal honestly with really tough texts. It forces us to come to grips with passages like Joshua 6:21. So without further delay, what are we to make of such remarkable and disturbing texts such as this?

One of the things that makes this verse and others like it elsewhere in Joshua so difficult is that to this point we’ve seen such wonderful truths about God: his faithfulness, his compassion, his commitment to his people and his promises, and the way he performs miracles to sustain them and guide them as they make their way into the promised land.

So how do we explain the fact that now God evidently commanded Israel to exterminate the entire population of Jericho: men, women, and children? In technical, biblical terms, this is referred to as *herem*, a word that literally means “to separate” or “to devote”. This was the practice in which people hostile to God were designated as “off-limits” to Israel and were to be separated or devoted to judgment and destruction (see Josh. 6:17,18,21).

Numerous attempts have been made to dismiss this problem or explain it away. For example:

(1) Some argue that *the decision was Joshua’s*, which indicates that Israel was simply at a very primitive stage of development. The OT itself is thus a record of a crude, warlike tribe of Hebrews who were simply fighting for survival. But this is difficult to reconcile with the explicit instructions that we see in Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and Joshua 10:40 (“just as the Lord God of Israel commanded”).

Related to this idea is the suggestion that the Israelites themselves took the initiative to slaughter the Canaanites and later *rationalized* it as the will of God. The many references to God “commanding” that Israel destroy their enemies did not come from God but were later additions to the narrative designed to provide Israel with a moral justification for what they did.

But if the latter were true, *why is there never any correction or rebuke found in the OT or the NT for what Israel did?* “If the conquest of Canaan had actually been such a massive and mistaken misinterpretation of God’s will, we should surely read some corrective word later in the Scriptures – if not within the Old Testament itself . . . then at least in the New. But we find none. There is no hint anywhere in the Bible that the Israelites took the land of Canaan on the basis of a mistaken belief in God’s will. On the contrary, the *refusal* of the exodus generation to go ahead and do it (in the great rebellion at Kadesh Barnea in Numbers 14), and the *failure* of the following generations to complete the task properly, are condemned as *disobedience* to God’s will (Ps. 106:24-35)” (Christopher Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand*, 82-83).

And let’s not lose sight of the fact it was God himself who is described in Joshua 23:3-5, 9-10, as fighting for the Israelites and giving them the land.

(2) Others insist that *the God of the OT is not the God and Father of Jesus in the NT*. The OT God is wrathful, vengeful, evil, and the NT God is loving and compassionate. Atheist author Richard Dawkins penned these infamous words:

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a

misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

But Jesus himself identified the Father as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." At no time is Jesus or any of the NT authors embarrassed by the OT nor do they seek to correct the OT record or apologize for it. Never once does any author in the NT suggest that what we read in the OT is immoral.

And we must reckon with the fact that *the OT has much to say about the love and compassion of God even as the NT has much to say about the wrath and judgment of God.*

(3) Some simply can't entertain the thought of God ordering such slaughter, so *they deny that the OT is the inspired word of God.* It is a merely human record of events in which a barbaric people tried to justify ruthless policies by appealing to divine sanction. But once again, Jesus' attitude to the OT must be noted (see Mt. 5; John 10), as well as that of Paul and other NT authors (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

There is no escaping the fact that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ordered and sanctioned the destruction of the Canaanite people. Why? Can such a God be worshiped and adored?

Many are inclined to read texts such as Joshua 6:21 and apologize for God: "We're sorry that God is like that! Please give him a chance. His positive characteristics and his good deeds outweigh the negative and bad ones." Understand this: I have no intention of apologizing *for* God. I rather think we should apologize *to* him.

The problem isn't that God is evil. The problem is that *we* are. It isn't that God has mistreated us, but that we have mistreated him. This text and others like it bother us for one fundamental reason: we have virtually no grasp on the holiness of God or the sinfulness of humanity. We have little sense of the transcendent beauty, moral purity, and infinite righteousness of the Creator. And we have little sense of the depth and extent and ugliness of our own depravity.

We think God exists for our welfare, to help us feel good about ourselves. Most people envision God as in their debt. He owes them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As we dig more deeply into this issue we will discover how profoundly misguided this is.

Several observations are in order.

(1) Although I'm not entirely convinced by this argument, I should point out that numerous scholars have argued that in the ancient near east there was *a standard, stereotypical way of talking about warfare in which absolute and comprehensive claims about total victory were often made that exceeded what actually occurred in reality.* In his book, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Baker), Paul Copan argues that Joshua often describes the conquest of Canaan utilizing the same *exaggerated rhetoric* common in that day and among the peoples who then lived. For example, in Joshua 10:40 we read that "Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction *all that breathed*, just as the Lord God of Israel commanded." Yet in Judges 1:21, 27-28; 2:3, some of the very people whom Joshua is thought to have completely destroyed are still alive and present in the land.

According to Copan and others, Joshua was simply saying, in the language of his day, that he had *thoroughly trounced* and defeated the enemy. *Universal and seemingly comprehensive language is used in order to highlight the thorough nature of the victory, but not to suggest that literally every single living being was killed. Thus Joshua typically used exaggerated language full of bravado, depicting total devastation.*

These scholars also cite the example of the Amalekites. We read in 1 Samuel 15:3 this command given to Saul:

"Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3).

Yet we read later in 1 Samuel 27:8 that David and his men went up and made raids against, among others, “the Amalekites”! The Amalekites, whom Saul had utterly destroyed, appear yet again in 1 Samuel 30:1.

But what about Joshua 6:21 and other texts that speak of “all men and women” and even “children” being destroyed? According to Copan and others, this may have been stereotypical language for describing the entirety of a city or land without necessarily meaning to suggest that literally every human being was killed. Many believe that what in fact happened was that *only political leaders and armed military combatants* were killed. *Non-combatants*, or what we would call “*civilians*,” were not killed. The words “women” and “children,” “young and old” were thus stock expressions for totality, even though neither women nor children were literally present.

(2) Second, Israel was not commanded to do this because of any *moral superiority*. See Deuteronomy 9:4-6. Indeed, the same fate was threatened against Israel if she were to rebel (Lev. 18:28; Deut. 8:19-20; 28:25-68). In fact, this is precisely what happened. Over the course of OT history there were far more Israelites who fell under God’s judgment than there were non-Israelites.

(3) Third, the Canaanites were *the most depraved, debauched, degenerate people of the ancient world*. They regularly engaged in religious prostitution as a way of increasing the fertility of the land. I realize how sick and strange that may sound, so allow me to explain in more detail.

In Canaanite religion the productivity of the land (the quality of the harvest) depended upon the sexual relationship between the pagan god Baal and his female counterpart. She went by a variety of names: Anath, Ashtoreth, or Ashtart. The people believed that they could actually motivate the gods to copulate by doing so themselves. So they built elaborate temples and shrines where men would have sex with any one of numerous so-called “sacred prostitutes” (yes, I realize it is a contradiction in terms!). The man envisioned himself fulfilling Baal’s role and the woman that of Anath. This, they believed, would stir “Mr. and Mrs. Baal” to do their thing, the result of which was rain and the resultant bountiful harvest of crops.

As sick as this may have been, it was nothing compared with other religious activities, such as the practice of *child sacrifice* (infants and young children were sacrificed to the fire of the god Molech). The full extent of Canaanite perversity can be seen by taking note of Leviticus 18. There God prohibits such things as incest, bestiality, and homosexuality, the very things practiced both by the Egyptians and the Canaanites. This remarkable chapter in Leviticus concludes with this statement:

“Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 18:24-30).

Thus, the Canaanites received everything they deserved. They received *justice*, Israel received *mercy*, but no one received *injustice*.

(4) Fourth, the judgment came *only after remarkable and gracious patience and opportunity for repentance*. See Genesis 15:16. God had given the people in Canaan centuries to repent! But they presumed on God’s patience and took it as indifference and indulged in even greater sin. See Joshua 2:10-14; 5:1; Jeremiah 18:7-10.

(5) Fifth, *the survival of both Israel and the world was at stake* because of the pervasive and perverting influence of such sin (see Deut. 7:1-4). We know, in fact, that on those occasions when Israel did not obey God’s order to exterminate the Canaanites, the latter polluted the former. The kings of Judah practiced child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). Sexual perversion was rampant (2 Kings 23:7). Israel practiced magic and

necromancy (2 Kings 21:6), and even murdered the prophets (Jer. 26:20-23). Other examples could be given. The point is this: God as the physician of mankind occasionally finds it necessary to amputate a leg that is gangrene in order to save the rest of the body.

(6) Sixth, think of **the flood of Noah!** There we see the extermination of virtually the entire human race because of their sin, with the exception of eight souls.

(7) Seventh, what God did in Canaan and Jericho is no different from what he at other times does through **providential disasters** such as famine, floods, pestilence, tornados, earthquakes, etc. Regardless of whether you believe God directly causes such devastation or merely permits it to occur, the fact remains that he could prevent it but chooses not to.

(8) Eighth, why do we object to God doing **during history** what we agree he will do at the **end** of history? If you are bothered by Joshua 6:21, what will you do with Revelation 19? In this latter text we read of the global destruction that will accompany the second coming of Christ. When he returns he will utterly destroy all his enemies. Furthermore, **if you think what God did at Jericho was unjust, what will you do with hell?**

Many, though, are still uncomfortable with what they read in Deuteronomy and Joshua. This is often because it assumed that all people have a fundamental right to life which even God himself must honor. Note well: we must distinguish between the "right to life" referred to in the pro-life movement and that which I describe here. No human has the right to take another human life unlawfully. The unborn child has a right, under law, to protection from murder. When a fetus dies from spontaneous miscarriage, we don't charge God with murder. Life belongs to God, not to man. When God gives life, we can't take it (except when Scripture says so: e.g., war, self-defense, capital punishment). But God can do with life whatever he pleases. Thus it's important to remember that the "right to life" governs our relationships with one another, but not God's relationship with us.

So we ask: "How could a just and loving God cause the extermination of innocent people in Jericho?" Answer: "He couldn't! He didn't!" The fact is, **not one innocent person in Jericho died.**

Consider the case of Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham's request that God not kill the righteous together with the unrighteous. See Genesis 18:23-33. God would have spared the entire city if only one righteous/innocent person could be found. There were none!

Let me illustrate this point by directing your attention to the reality of the **OT death penalty.**

In the Mosaic code, people could be executed for adultery, blasphemy, incorrigible juvenile delinquency, breaking the Sabbath, homosexuality, rape, just a few of the 15-20 crimes for which one would suffer loss of life. Many respond to this by saying: "How barbaric! How intolerant of God! How unjust!"

But contrary to widespread perception, *the Mosaic Law actually represents a massive reduction in capital offenses from the original list.* As R. C. Sproul puts it, "the OT code represents a bending over backwards of divine patience and forbearance. **The OT law is one of astonishing grace**" (*The Holiness of God*, 148).

The original law of the universe is that "the soul that sins, it shall die." Life is a divine gift, not a debt. Sin brings the loss of the gift of life. **Once a person sins he forfeits any claim on God to human existence.** God was not obligated to give us life. The fact that we continue to exist after sinning is due entirely to divine mercy and gracious longsuffering.

We recoil and are aghast at what we are convinced was undue cruelty and severity in the OT law because we are twisted and confused in our thinking. **We think we deserve to live and that God owes us life.** The fact that God made only 15-20 sins capital offenses was a remarkable act of mercy, compassion and grace. Why? Because it would have been perfectly just and fair and righteous had he made *every* sin a capital offense. The Mosaic stipulations regarding the death penalty, therefore, were remarkably lenient and gracious.

I would suggest, therefore, that *the mystery in Jericho is not that God would exterminate them all, but that he didn't exterminate them all sooner than he did!* We have arrogantly presumed on a mythical "right to life" and thus are shocked by death. In fact, we ought to be shocked, but by life, not death!

Consider Luke 13:1-5. The cry is: "How could God let innocent bystanders die this way?" Jesus might have responded: "I'm so sorry. It was an accident. My Father was tired from a long night of running the world and he momentarily fell asleep. Or maybe he was counting hairs on heads or watching sparrows fall or busy on the other side of the globe." No. Rather, he says: "Unless you repent, you too will perish!" In other words, they asked the wrong question. They should have asked: "Why didn't that tower fall on *me*?"

The fact that we draw breath this moment is *an act of mercy, not justice*. We have presumed upon divine grace and are thus shocked by his justice. Rather we ought to expect his justice and be shocked by his mercy!

The amazing thing isn't that God in wrath exterminated the Canaanites. The amazing thing is that he hasn't exterminated **us**. And why hasn't he? The only explanation is that Jesus Christ took upon himself on the cross the wrath and judgment that we otherwise deserved. I have no way of knowing or predicting how you or I will die. But die we will. Whether it be from a tornado, a terrorist attack, cancer, a car wreck, or simply from old age, is something none of us can know with certainty.

But this I know beyond the shadow of a doubt: whenever a born-again child of God dies, it is not under the judgment and wrath of God!