

## Holy War

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

*Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan*

*June 10 & 11, 2019*

**Scripture: Joshua 5:12-6:5; 6:20-21**

### Sermon

I don't know how you managed, but when I started reading the book of Joshua last week, I was a wreck. Ugh. The slaughter! Men, and women, and children! And by God's orders!? How can that be?

It was so upsetting that I started searching for some way to let God off the hook. You know, maybe God didn't really say, "Destroy every living thing." Maybe it was just Joshua. Maybe Joshua went overboard. Maybe he didn't have a poetic bone in his body. So he didn't recognize it when God was exaggerating for effect. Yeah, that was it. That had to be it!

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Then I turned to Deuteronomy 20, and I started breathing a little easier. Because it didn't sound so bloodthirsty. Deuteronomy 20 makes room for peace. And in case there is war, women and children are spared. Whew! Obviously Joshua had gone too far.

But I kept reading in Deuteronomy 20. And there it was. When it comes to Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, and all the rest: no mercy. Kill them all. Don't leave anyone alive. If you want to show mercy, show it to fruit trees! That's what Deuteronomy 20 says. And Joshua is right in step with it.

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Again, I don't know how you managed, but after I read all this stuff, I was depressed for the rest of the day. A cloud was hanging over me, and I couldn't shake it. Something about these Scriptures shakes my faith. Because these Scriptures paint a picture of God that I don't want to see.

SOME PEOPLE THINK THAT GOD REALLY WAS EXAGGERATING. And that the book of Joshua is exaggerating, too. Here's what they suggest. That the Israelites didn't really wipe out every living thing. It's just that they won a decisive victory. The way the Raptors "slaughtered" the Warriors the last couple of games. (We'll see about tonight.)

So, for some people, the solution to these terrible stories is to say that the slaughter wasn't as bad as it could have been. But I don't know about that. And even if it is true, it doesn't help me a whole lot. A smaller slaughter is still a slaughter.

HERE'S ANOTHER APPROACH TO THESE TERRIBLE STORIES. Just point out how amazingly wicked the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, and all the rest were. In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul catalogs human wickedness: refusing to glorify God, they worshipped created things instead; inflamed with lust, they corrupted God's gift of sexuality; rejecting the knowledge of God, they used their minds to dream up every sort of evil and hatred.

Now, every bit of that was true about the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, and all the rest. They even sacrificed their children to made-up gods. And God had been watching them. Hundreds of years earlier, he told Abraham that the sin of the Amorites was not yet complete. Well, now that sin was complete. And through Joshua and the Israelites, the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, and all the rest were getting what they deserved. Hooray! Or maybe not.

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There's a Jewish story about angels watching the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites cross the Red Sea. And when the water swallows up the Egyptians, the angels start to cheer.

Well, God shuts them down. It's one thing for the Israelites to celebrate their own deliverance. But the angels, they should take a larger view of things. And they should feel sorrow that so many human beings, creatures made in the image of God, are being destroyed. I imagine we should feel that sorrow, too.

ONE MORE APPROACH TO THOSE TERRIBLE STORIES STARTS WITH THIS. That the Israelites lived in a brutal world, and they accepted that brutality because it was the only thing they knew. That the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, and all the rest—they expected that kind of brutality because that was how the world worked. And that God was working within the outlines of that brutal world, accepting the reality but not endorsing it.

Well, I don't know about that one. It leaves me wondering why God didn't just snap his fingers and change reality without all the bloodshed.

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But as soon as I say that, I think of Jesus. I think of how God worked within the outlines of the Roman world, with all its brutality, with all its crosses. God never endorsed that brutality. But he did suffer a cross.

SO WHERE DOES ALL THIS LEAVE US? What are we supposed to do with those terrible stories in the book of Joshua? Obviously the book of Joshua doesn't give us the whole story of God at work in the world. Even the entire Old Testament doesn't give us the whole story. And right now, we are at a place in the story that Old Testament Israel never was. And absolutely we are at a place in the story that Joshua never was.

For us the story is about Jesus: his life and death and resurrection. For us the story is about Jesus: his ascension and his authority and his continuing presence through the Spirit and the Word.

So, once more, what are we supposed to do with those stories in the book of Joshua? Well, here's one lesson, at least, that we can take away from those stories without endorsing the brutality. It's the lesson of obedience to a God-given mission.

JOSHUA AND THE ISRAELITES PLAYED AN IMPORTANT, ACTIVE ROLE in God's plan to establish Israel in the land of Canaan. And this was so that, eventually, all the families on the earth would be blessed by the family of Abraham. The role that Joshua and the Israelites played was to be obedient to the word of God in a brutal world. The role they played was to do what God said.

When the angel of the Lord's army told Joshua to take off his sandals, he did as he was told. When Joshua told the Israelites to march around Jericho and to shout at the loud trumpet blast, they did as they were told. Throughout the book of Joshua, what matters is that Joshua and the Israelites do as they were told. That's how God moves the story forward. That's a key lesson from the book of Joshua.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS, CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST, our calling is to do what we have been told. Our calling is to go into the world, but not to bring death to the enemies of God. Our calling is to bring the light of Christ to a world in darkness, and to bring the life of Christ to a world held captive by the fear of death.

Jesus doesn't tell us, "Go, kill and conquer!" No; he tells us to go and make disciples. He tells us to baptize and teach. And when the world, when the nations, would be against us, he doesn't tell us to take up arms against them. No; he tells us to take up the crosses they lay upon us. He tells us to let our suffering and even our death reveal the new reality of God's Kingdom.

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The prophet Isaiah saw that Kingdom from far off:

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's house  
will be the highest of all—  
the most important place on earth.  
It will be raised above the other hills,  
and people from all over the world will stream there to worship.  
People from many nations will come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of Jacob's God.  
There he will teach us his ways,  
and we will walk in his paths."  
For the Lord's teaching will go out from Zion;  
his word will go out from Jerusalem.  
The Lord will mediate between nations  
and will settle international disputes.  
They will hammer their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will no longer fight against nation,  
nor train for war anymore.

I don't suppose Joshua ever imagined that day. He only knew a brutal world. But we have seen a better way in Jesus Christ. And through him, by God's mercy, the better day will come!

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Glory and thanks be to God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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