

The Victory of God

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Today we're looking at what may be a familiar story, the conquest of Jericho. Is it a case for holy war? Is the Canaanite slaughter an unjust act of genocide? What are we to make of the exceptional treatment of one Canaanite, Rahab? How can such a story be applied to today? Let's look at the March, Siege, Exception.

The March

Problem facing Israel is stated up front. The Canaanite city of Jericho is shut up. No one comes in or out. Envision an impregnable city. Israel has no siege works, no capacity for taking the city. But as modern readers, another problem pokes out. *Should Israel be fighting at all, taking lives and land, engaging in conquest? Is this a holy war?* In order to understand what's happening in Joshua, we need consider how ANE people viewed war. In the ANE, subjugation and removal of people from a land had a *religious* purpose. They saw land as a site to be purified for the dwelling of their god. Once the land was cleared of inhabitants, they would erect a temple or city for the god to dwell in, from which the god would rule. Israel was not the only nation to think this way. King Sargon of the Akkadian empire cleared land in Mesopotamia destroying the town of Magganubba to build his new capital city. It wasn't simple warmongering. He did it to purify the land and erect a temple from which his (as a polytheist) deities would rule. Their rule was meant to establish the center of order for the cosmos. What does this tell us about the way the ancient world viewed war? "All wars were holy wars." All wars were for the gods. The major difference with Israel is that their conquest was for *one* true God, YHWH, who called Israel into special covenant with him, a holy nation. This meant those outside of the covenant stood in opposition to him as peoples of disorder and chaos: "*However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy (and we'll come back to this) them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God*" (Deut 20:16-18). So, purifying the land was a step toward overturning subversive, idolatrous chaos to establish the administration of the true, pure and holy Lord of all. Remember, the world is a fallen state flagrantly spinning away from devotion to the Creator. Needs the true light. Another difference is that Israel wasn't seeking to take over the world but to be an ideal embodiment of devotion to YHWH, in a particular place. To be a come and see nation, not a go and conquer nation. In this sense, we are not witnessing a mere holy war; we're watching the divine Commander bring his invisible, angelic armies to bear his purifying presence on earth. This should put us on our face, as it did Joshua, because apart from Jesus Christ we are all chaotic Canaanites outside covenant. We did nothing to get into covenant with God. We don't even deserve to be here and should tremble as we hear the Commander say: "*See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor*" (2). I will secure comprehensive victory *apart from you*: the city, the king, and the best warriors. This single-handed power and glory of Christ are why Israel's tactics are so bizarre. They march around the city *behind the ark*, the footstool of the cosmic God. Not a peep out of them. Not a sword brandished. Make no mistake; this is YHWH's victory. It's why the number seven surfaces a lot: seven times, on

the seventh day—the number of perfection—reinforcing this is *divine* work. Of course, there is human responsibility—march, blow, and shout—but all in *response* to the divine presence. We often get this backwards. We put energy into what we can do for God, our concerns, our insights and lose sight of the grandeur of God. What floats to the surface is our agenda, our ministry, our thing. But you know what God blesses? A heart face-down before him. Hands flat-open. A person so yielded to God they're willing to look absurd. This is faith: “By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days” (11:30). God did the work. Israel trusted; the walls came down. *His* timing, *his* way. Cause its not about us; it's about him. It may look absurd *but not when you're looking at the Captain of the Lord's armies.*

The Siege

After the walls fell down, Israel charges in. We're told, “Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword” (21)? The first time I read this I got queasy. Devoted to destruction, such harsh terms, and just look at the scope, awful. *Is this genocide?* The term devoted to destruction is *herem*—and its meaning is *not* to destroy utterly. The word means “to remove something from use.” It is an irrevocable act. One way to remove things from use is by destroying them. But Israel uses other means, which is why the accusation of genocide doesn't stick. Israel allows some Canaanites to run away, and in another instance enters into a treaty with the Gibeonites. Israel itself was comprised of many ethnicities. A mixed multitude went up with them from Egypt, and other ethnic peoples joined them out of devotion to YHWH. In fact the Law plainly says, “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Lev 19: 33-34). Israel welcomed the foreigner, but the stark reality is that they were up against chaotic, entrenched *enemies*. And those enemies were not so welcoming. So while the siege is not genocide, and it is awful, it is *just*. The chaotic evil of the land must be removed from use. God is holy and so should his dwelling place be. So Israel removes Jericho from use, its pagan presence null and void, purifying the land. Walton suggests we think of Israel as a patient and Canaan as a surgical room. The room must be sterilized to preserve the patient. When it comes time for surgery, all visitors, food, pets, and bacteria must be removed. This is not because of a prejudice toward a particular group of people; rather, it is for the health of the patient, the glorious success of the procedure, *which will bring salvation to the ends of the earth!* And it does, as Israel provides us with the Scriptures and the very Son of God. Besides, does not God have the right to do whatever he wants with his creation? Everything is contingent upon him. He is Lord of all. So far he's shown tremendous *mercy* toward the pagan and idolatrous people of Jericho. Now he shows *judgment* in zealous pursuit of his glory. And the same standard is applied to *Israel*. As Israel goes into the city Joshua warns, “But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction (*herem*), 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” (18). All the silver, gold, and bronze are to go to the treasury; everything else is to be destroyed. No booty taken. Is this because God doesn't like fabrics and food? No, it's because they're earmarked for *rendering useless*, sterilized for God's presence. Who are we to quibble with him? And yet we do. We demand just treatment, a better job, better kids. Now justice or a job aren't bad things, nor is it wrong to

desire them, but when those things *become an object of devotion*, when we want them angrily or despairingly, as though we can't live without them, we cross into false worship. We take what God has declared "Mine." His is the justice, his is the job, his is the children, his is the glory to give and withhold. So how do you know when you're crossing the line? You'll become very critical of people who *have* the things you want. You see someone get the job you want and discredit them in your mind. You'll see someone else get just treatment, and *demand* you get that too. Because you are possessed by the devoted thing, and you bring it into the camp and it upends the community as you insist on your way, your timing, your thing. A Canaanite! And so a good thing that does not belong to you becomes a crushing thing, not just for you but for those around you. In the NT the idea of herem carries over, but with a radical twist. The presence of God is relocated, from a land to individual people. My body is the temple of God, Paul says. So we are responsible for "removing from use" the things that contaminate our temple. Jesus says, *And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire*" (Mt 18:9). Are you that tenacious about keeping the temple clean or *consumed* with lesser objects of devotion? Honor the temple presence of God.

Exception

Finally, the exception, not an exception to holiness but an exception to *herem*: Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent" (6:17). Rahab and her whole household are rescued. Why? Because of her faith in God. It looks absurd, hiding spies the royal court, scarlet cord down the window, but she trusts. She's temporarily placed outside the camp, but eventually moved so deeply into the camp that she becomes a great grandmother of Jesus himself. Perhaps why the author notes, and *she has lived with Israel to this day.* Why was she saved? When presented with the special revelation of YHWH rescuing Israel from Egypt by parting the Red Sea, *her heart melted in faith.* She chose to entrust her life, open her hands, at great risk, to the one true God. Will you? Take a good look at this God. He commands the armies of heaven, and answers every cry of faith on earth. God remembered Rahab *because of her faith in him.* And he will remember you *if you put your faith in him.* And this act of faith had long-lasting effects, well into the genealogy of Jesus, and into this room today. Your choices will have long lasting effects, whether you choose to live for the Ultimate Thing or the devoted thing, to surrender all to God or to keep back for yourself. Keep your temple holy. Put sin to death. Get serious about your faith with others, clear away the devoted things, inspire one another to trust the one, true Thing, Christ Jesus our Lord. Because His body was *destroyed*, marred beyond recognition Isaiah tells us, so we could enter the camp, trust his promises, and enjoy his presence. In the words of the late Billy Graham, "The cross shows us the seriousness of our sin—but it also shows us the immeasurable love of God."