

Burning for God

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God's Strategy

In England a chain of pubs decided to ban swearing in their facilities. Signs went up: *"We wish to inform all of our customers that we have introduced a zero tolerance policy against swearing in all of our pubs. Please kindly respect this policy."* Imagine how *that* went over. Reflecting on the ban *New Yorker* writer Lauren Collins noted that, as a social experiment it was at once *idealistic* and *authoritarian*. Idealistic, aiming for respectable speech. Authoritarian, accomplishing it by law. She went on to say the ban suggests a very interesting idea: *"the garden can be got back to, as long as we all obey the gardener."* Is it true? We certainly want Eden back—the bombings, headlines, personal sorrows make us pine for it—but is the way back by *obeying the gardener*, keeping his law? Israel faces this very question. On the path to Eden, a land flowing with milk and honey, they keep God's commands and attack city of Ai. All looks good *until they are defeated*. Achan jeopardizes return to paradise when he breaks God's commands. God threatens the whole nation. *Trouble* in paradise, until Achan is caught and God relents from his anger. Now imagine what they're thinking: Should we go any further? What if we fail again? Will we reach the land? God anticipates his fear, *"And the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not fear and do not be dismayed" (8:1)*. This week our city group was discussing our response to the bombings. And one person asked, Is it sinful to be afraid? I suppose you could take this as a rebuke, but there's more empathy here, God isn't scolding him. In fact, when God or an angel appear and an individual fears for their lives, do you know what's frequently said? Don't be afraid. It's less wagging finger and more of reassuring arm around the neck. To Joshua he says *I will be with you (1:8)* and goes further. He promises the city they flubbed. Just as he gave them Jericho, they will take Ai *and* get to keep some of the spoil, *but the rest must be burned*. A clear command that must be kept to continue toward paradise, suggesting the way back to the garden is by obeying the Gardener. Joshua and his army set out but *with an unconventional strategy*. Turns out God's plan for taking the city is almost a complete reversal of Joshua's prior plan. Instead of 3,000 men; he's to take 30,000. Instead of a front assault, they will ambush from behind. Instead of broad daylight, they move into position under cover of night. God frequently uses unconventional strategy (march around Jericho, narrow the numbers). He favors weakness not strength, risk not safety, the faithful over the intellectual. He even puts the most powerful person in the most vulnerable position. Joshua is with the people, on the front lines, with the smaller army, which will receive the brunt of Ai's initial attack. This all hints that the way back to the garden may *not* be what we think, that God's ways are not our ways. And yet the British pub story is onto something. Keep God's commands and there's blessing, spoil, victory. Break God's commands and there's judgment, punishment, death. There is a moral order to the universe. History will favor, not the powerful or the powerless, but the faithful, those who over the arc of their life choose to trust God's strategy not their own.

God's Victory

How does trusting an unconventional God work out? Joshua and his men charge the city, drawing the Amorites out who respond in full force, not a soldier left behind. Ai is left unattended. Joshua lifts his javelin high, signals to the forces positioned behind the city.

They attack and *quickly* set fire to the city. The men of Ai look back, smoke curling to heaven, and are caught between Israel's forces. It's a slaughter. Now if you've seen Braveheart or any other pre-modern war movie this isn't novel. It may have been then, but novelty isn't the point. What's the point? It's hidden in the burning city, repeated three times (8, 19, 28). Turns out burning conquered pagan cities was required by law. According to Deut 13, Israel was to gather the spoils of pagan cities into the center and burn it. Why? burn the city and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall be a heap forever. It shall not be built again (16). At the least, it's obedience to the law, upholding the moral order, making way for pure and holy presence of YHWH to dwell in the land. But the city isn't just burnt; it's a burnt offering. Burnt offerings were one of five types of sacrifices a worshipper could make. Each had a slightly different shade of meaning. The *burnt offering* was the only offering which was consumed entirely by fire. What might that symbolize? Complete destruction of the worshipper. We know this from next verse 13:17, "None of the devoted things shall stick to your hand, that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of his anger and show you mercy and have compassion on you." In other words, if there wasn't a smoking sacrifice, you'd be burned by God's just and fierce anger. But because there is a sacrifice, his anger is turned away, destroying the animal not the worshipper. Reminding us God, the moral authority of the universe, determines what's right, not you or me. Isn't that oppressive? Well it is, and justly so. We deserve what the city gets, the oppressive burning holy anger of God. Conventional ancient logic agreed with this. Near Eastern cultures recognized the god was in place to get rid of the chaos. But Israel's God also works in unconventional ways. Turns out the burnt offering carries a second meaning. What else happens when something burns? It's *consumed, consecrated, totally devoted.* Jesus says, "Whoever find his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." And the word lose here can also mean "to utterly destroy." You have to destroy your life, Jesus says, to gain it. We have to put to death anything else we are prone to build our identity on (being liked, successful, attractive, sexy, pious, leaving a legacy). Only then Jesus says will you find your true self. You've got to burn everything else down and build yourself on Me, become an adoring planet in *my* universe, orbiting in the real world of *my* glory. Consecrate yourself to me, and you'll be a living sacrifice, a person who dies but lives on. See it's a reversal of everything we're told. God favors the weak not the strong; the meek not the proud inherit the earth. Burnt offering is utter destruction *and* total consecration, losing and gaining. So the city is utterly destroyed—the death of the worshipper—but also totally consecrated "to the Lord your God"—the life of the worshipper. But how do we get to the life part? Go from destruction to consecration. It can be so hard to dedicate everything to God. Well they only saw it dimly at the time, but tucked away in the symbolism of burnt offering is the idea of a new birth or **resurrection**. See, if the burnt offering symbolizes the deserved death of the worshipper, it requires a kind of resurrection of the worshipper to go on. Living sacrifice is possible only if death is conquered and new life shoots up its place. And here's where it gets unconventional. In the gospel, God dies in our place, the powerful becomes vulnerable, strong becomes weak, and Jesus receives the full frontal assault of God's holy anger in our place, and three days later rises from the dead to give us new life, to resurrect us to a new identity able to consecrate everything to God. By faith his resurrection becomes our resurrection; his life our life. God's strategy reverses everything: life out of death, strength out of weakness. The way back to

the garden isn't simply by obeying the Gardener, but by the Gardener obeying for us, reversing the order of everything! So now you can do it; you can obey, throw off sin!

God's Altar

What's a proper response? Renewal of our commitment. Israel renews their commitment to God in a ceremony of covenant renewal. They gather between two mountains, half on Mt. Ebal and the other half on Mt. Gerizim just as Moses had instructed them when they reached the promised land. So they obediently conduct the ceremony in a valley, which was incredibly helpful for acoustics, to amplify Joshua's voice. Then two very significant things happen. They build an altar and read the **Law**. They take some rather large stones, whitewash them, and write the Law on stones, probably inscribing a summary of the Law, the Ten Commandments. The heart of their covenant relationship with God, their way back into Eden. The Promised Land is consistently cast as a new Eden, the place where God would dwell with his people again. And obeying the Gardner figures prominently into this utopia. Blessing and curses are read aloud, equally inspired, reminding Israel of the consequences of obedience and disobedience. God is holy and his people are to reflect his moral order and beauty. The **altar** reminds us that God is not all authority commanding obedience. What do you do at altars? You worship. You kneel down in the Presence. You are struck with soul-gladdening awe as you come face to face with your Creator. And there they perform burnt and peace offerings. The burnt offering reminds them that God works in unconventional ways; he consumes you to make a new you, lose your life and you gain it, and he does this by becoming the sacrifice himself. Jesus climbs on a wooden altar and is burned for us. You see, it is possible to get back to the garden, but not by our obedience but by his. And when you get in touch with this kind of God, when we are stirred by this great reversal—Jesus buried in death, us clothed in his life—you are endeared to consecrate yourself yet again, to say where you go I will follow, to obey the Gardener. But it's not your obedience that gets you in; it is his. Our obedience, then, becomes a peace offering, a fellowship or communion offering signifying restored fellowship with God. Turns out the columnist was partly right. There is a way back to the Garden, and it does include obedience, but not as if earns us the right to be there, but as in relishing Jesus who gets us there in the first place. The unconventional grace of God in Christ Jesus!