

This morning I am in the fourth week of a sermon series I am doing on the Old Testament book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible. If you're unfamiliar with this book of the Bible, the historical context is that the Israelites, who were enslaved in Egypt, have been set free by God, using a man named Moses, with the plan of bringing them to the land of Canaan, a land which God had promised to their ancestor Abraham 600 years earlier. After the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years as a result of their disobedience, Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, which we looked at last week. This morning, we are in chapters 5 & 6, as the Israelites prepare to attack the first city in the Promised Land, Jericho. I plan to read the passage and talk about its significance for us today, and also to address the important question of how you make sense of the what the new atheists would call the "Canaanite genocide."

Joshua 5:1 - 6:27- Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the LORD had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until we had crossed over, their hearts melted and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.

As we begin the chapter, the Israelites have crossed over to the promised land, and the inhabitants of Canaan are in fear. What a great time to attack, right?

² At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again." ³ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth. ⁴ Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt-- all the men of military age-- died in the desert on the way after leaving Egypt. ⁵ All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not. ⁶ The Israelites had moved about in the desert forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, since they had not obeyed the LORD. For the LORD had sworn to them that they would not see the land that he had solemnly promised their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷ So he raised up their sons in their place, and these were the ones Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way. ⁸ And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.

The inhabitants of Canaan are afraid, and it seems from a human perspective to be the right time to attack. But instead, God tells Joshua to have the men circumcised,

an act that will most certainly leave the men in a terrible position to fight for a short time. What is circumcision and why does it matter?

Circumcision is the cutting away of the foreskin, typically done in Judaism to an 8-day old male. It is the sign of the old covenant between God and His people, just as baptism is the sign of the new covenant that Jesus made with us.

Genesis 17:10-11 - *This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.*

So, instead of attacking, God has the Israelites weaken themselves and make themselves vulnerable? **Clearly, when it comes to battle, being in right relationship with God is more important than following your human wisdom and strategy.**

¹⁰ *On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. ¹¹ The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. ¹² The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate of the produce of Canaan.*

Once again, instead of attacking, now God has them celebrate a meal together. What was the Passover and why does it matter?

Exodus 12:11-14 - *This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's **Passover**. ¹² "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn-- both men and animals-- and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. ¹⁴ "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD-- a lasting ordinance.*

The Passover meal is a reminder of God's salvation. Once again, instead of leading them to attack, God first has them make sure they are right with Him and they are reminded of God's ability to miraculously save and deliver them from their enemies.

¹³ Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" ¹⁴ "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" ¹⁵ The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.

This a theophany, an appearance of God. The angel of the Lord is usually the Lord, an OT appearance of the eternal Son of God, as seen by the fact that He receives Joshua's worship, something an angel would not do. His message to Joshua is that this is not your army or your battle, Joshua. This is mine. And I am not on your side; but are you on my side? I am not

^{NIV} Joshua 6:1 Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. ² Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man **straight in.**" ⁶ So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it." ⁷ And he ordered the people, "Advance! March around the city, with the armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD." ⁸ When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them. ⁹ The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the **trumpets were sounding.** ¹⁰ But Joshua had commanded the people, "Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!" ¹¹ So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once. Then the people returned to camp and spent the night there. ¹² Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. ¹³ The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the **trumpets kept sounding.** ¹⁴ So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did

this for six days. ¹⁵ On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. ¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city! ¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. ¹⁸ But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. ¹⁹ All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury." ²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city. ²¹ They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it-- men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys. ²² Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her." ²³ So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel. ²⁴ Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD's house. ²⁵ But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho-- and she lives among the Israelites to this day. ²⁶ At that time Joshua pronounced this solemn oath: "Cursed before the LORD is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: "At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates." ²⁷ So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.

They defeat Jericho with no real military strategy. The main message from this passage is that the battle is the Lord's. **The job of the people is to be in right relationship with Him and follow His lead.** It is not going to be by their human wisdom or strategy, but by being right with God and following His lead. Certainly, the battle strategy to take Jericho is not what they would have dreamed up in their human wisdom.

The battles we fight today, and the enemies we face, may be very different today, but the strategy has not changed. More important than following your worldly wisdom and strategies is to be right with God and follow His lead. He may lead us

to fight using the wisdom and strategies of the world, but being right with Him and following His lead is the most important thing.

What about the “genocide of the Canaanites”?

Listen to Richard Dawkins in his 2006 book *The God Delusion*:

The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so. As the charming old song exultantly has it, ‘Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumbling down’ . . . Good old Joshua didn’t rest until ‘they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword’ (Joshua 6: 21)... the Bible story of Joshua’s destruction of Jericho, and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler’s invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein’s massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs.

First of all, wherever you do not understand, please ask questions. Share your doubts. That is so important. God is not afraid of questions, nor am I. There are answers. Seek to understand.

So what are the objections? God is accused of ethnic cleansing, that the Joshua account is nothing more than a tribal God laying waste to other ethnicities, or a people-group using “God” to justify their holy war, killing innocent people to appease a bloodthirsty God. Is this nothing more than a “holy war,” a genocide justified by saying that it is done “in the name of God”? No, it isn’t. Let me give you five reasons why the New Atheists are wrong:

1) God’s judgment is not based on ethnicity but wickedness

The Bible is clear that the conquering of the Canaanites is not ethnic cleansing on par with Hitler’s invasion of Poland, but is rather God’s judgment of a wicked people who had passed the point of redemption. Listen to God’s words to Abraham 430 years before the battle of Jericho.

Genesis 15:13-16 - *Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however,*

will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

The Amorites is another name for the inhabitants of Canaan. God was giving them time to repent and stop their evil practices. But when they had “reached their full measure,” meaning that there was no hope of redemption, the right thing to do was not to let them continue to visit their evil on the world, but to remove them. Like removing a cancer. Again, listen to Moses:

Deuteronomy 9:4-5 - *After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. ⁵ It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

Do you see? It’s not about their special relationship with God. **God is using the Israelites as an instrument of judgment on a wicked people, and in the process is fulfilling the promise He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.** In Deuteronomy, we read about the Canaanites’ idolatry, their sexual sin, and their practice of child sacrifice, all of which contributes to their destruction.

So, once more – to the charge that this is an egregious example of ethnic cleansing, that God is a genocidal maniac, what the text actually tells us is that the judgment was not about their ethnicity but about their wickedness. First of all, remember that God was willing to wait 430 years to give the Canaanites time to repent, but they refused. This is consistent with the character of God throughout the Bible.

Consider what Peter wrote:

2 Peter 3:8-9 - *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is **patient** with you, not wanting anyone to **perish**, but everyone to come to repentance.*

Secondly, God regularly reminded his people of Israel that if they persisted in wickedness, they also would be judged and removed from the land.

Deuteronomy 4:23-27 - *Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. ²⁵ After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time-- if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God and provoking him to anger, ²⁶ I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. ²⁷ The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you.*

And that is exactly what happened, as eventually God sent in the Assyrians and the Babylonians to judge the Israelites and drive them from the land.

Thirdly, on a philosophical level, it is interesting to see how people complain when God eradicates a wicked, irredeemable people, but they also complain when God does not put a stop to evil? Some would ask, how can God allow the Holocaust? But if he had wiped out Germany, people would be asking, how could God allow Germany to be destroyed? Could it be that only God has the proper perspective to know when to take a life and when to exercise patience. God's decision to eradicate wickedness comes from a place of love, as He acts in history to remove the cancer before it kills the world, so that His plan of redemption might succeed.

Okay, so maybe it's not ethnic cleansing by a genocidal maniac but just judgment of a wicked people. **But what about the commands, known as the Hebrew word "herem," to completely exterminate the people, men and women, young and old?**

Deuteronomy 7:1-6 - *When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations-- the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you-- ² and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.*

2) Herem is about removing a wicked, idolatrous identity, not an entire people

Continue reading those commands:

³ Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. ⁵ This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. ⁶ For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

This is where it is necessary to be able to read a passage in its literary and historical context. Destroy them totally does not mean to kill every single person. It's like saying the Patriots annihilated the Jets or totally destroyed them. And "men and women, young and old" is a way of saying the same thing. It is called "non-literal hyperbolic language." As you see from the Deuteronomy passage, God tells them to totally destroy them, and follows it up by telling them not to intermarry with them. We see something similar in Joshua 10 and 11, where we are told that a people is utterly destroyed, but a few chapters later, they are still interacting with the people.

Paul Copan, in his book "Is God a Moral Monster?" gives many other Ancient Near East comparisons. The "herem" command was to destroy the identity of a conquered people, to purge the land of Canaanite idolatry, and to utterly destroy the combatants.

Deuteronomy 20:16-18 - *However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. ¹⁷ Completely destroy them-- the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites-- as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹⁸ 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.*

Idolatry is not just choosing another religion. The OT connects idolatry with the demonic, with the cosmic enemies of God who rebelled against him. And every time Israel failed to eradicate idolatry, it led to their downfall.

Furthermore, the reality is that Jericho was a military stronghold, as was the next city they would attack, Ai. The wars were directed towards the government and military establishments – they were to destroy every man and woman in the fort. Most of the civilians lived out in the countryside.

Herem is about identity, not ethnicity. The aim is removing the identity of a conquered people, which was a standard procedure of ancient warfare. Remove the Canaanite identity from the use of every individual who remains in the land. In order to serve God's purposes, we must purge ourselves of all identities other than "in Christ."

If the Israelites hadn't done serious damage to the Canaanite religious infrastructure, the result would have been incalculable damage to Israel's integrity and thus to God's entire plan to redeem humanity.

The reality is that God takes sin much seriously than we do, and wants us to completely destroy anything that is an idol:

Matthew 5:29-30 - If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Talk about non-literal hyperbolic language!

And the truth is that even if God decides to kill women and children, He has that right, because He is the author of life and can take back that life whenever He pleases.

3) God has the right to take life, and death is not the end

God is the author of life and has a rightful claim on it as Creator. Therefore, humans can make no demands on how long a person ought to live on earth. In fact, our objection to people's deaths is often because we think we deserve long life. It can be a challenge to recognize the Biblical perspective, that this is not the case:

Romans 6:23 - For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If God is God and we aren't, then our rights will necessarily be limited to some degree. If any infants and children were killed, they would have entered the presence of God. Though deprived of earthly life, these young ones wouldn't have been deprived of the greatest good—enjoying God's presence forever. We don't die; we change locations. God has the right to take a life whenever he wants to.

Okay, so this is not an example of ethnic cleansing, or of indiscriminate killing of civilians. But it still sets a dangerous precedent of killing in the name of God.

4) It is not a model to follow but is limited to a particular time and place in salvation history

In the Ancient Near East, warfare was a way of life and a means of survival. God's typical commands to Israel was to pursue peace with other nations. But for a specific, relatively short, and strategic period, God sought to establish Israel in the land of Canaan, with a view to fulfilling His long-term, global plan of redemption. God would simultaneously punish a wicked people ripe for judgment. Not doing so would have erased humankind's only hope for redemption.

But Israel can't just choose who to fight; that determination is left up to God to reveal to them. Think of Israel going into battle against the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4 with the ark; they were defeated.

In the OT, Israel was a theocracy. As we move into the NT, they are under Roman occupation. And when Jesus comes, He tells them clearly that His kingdom is not of this world.

John 18:36 - Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

His kingdom is not of this world, and we do not wage war as the world does.

2 Corinthians 10:3-4 - For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

He is not a tribal God:

5) God is not a tribal God, but has always desired the salvation of the world

Genesis 12:1-3 - The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will

be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

God's promise is to bless all the nations. The Psalms and prophets are filled with words about the nations coming to faith:

Isaiah 19:23-25 - *In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. ²⁴ In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. ²⁵ The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."*

Think of Jonah and Ninevah. And think of how this continues in the NT:

Ephesians 2:11-16 - *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)-- ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

- 1) *God's judgment is not based on ethnicity but wickedness*
- 2) *"Herem" is about removing a wicked, idolatrous identity, not an entire people group*
- 3) *God has the right to take life, and death is not the end*
- 4) *Joshua 6 is not a model to follow but is limited to a particular time and place in salvation history*
- 5) *God is not a tribal God, but has always desired the salvation of the whole world*

In the end, we choose to trust even if we don't fully understand.

As Isaiah 55:8–9 affirms: “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor 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. ’*”

If God is big enough to create all of this and to be worshiped, then he is big enough to have reasons for things that we can not understand. After all, He is not just a far off God, but a God who allowed Himself to be crucified by His enemies in the hopes of saving them.