

Joshua: God's Conquest, III

In our previous discussion of the book of Joshua we covered the first six chapters, which I title "the conquest divinely initiated." Now we will move on to talk about the human side of the equation in the section I call, "the conquest humanly mitigated." As I said before, I divide these sections differently than many commentators. Most people divide the sections between chapters 5 and 6. But in order to show more clearly what God did first, for He brought that first great victory in chapter 6, I group those six chapters together as one section. Then the human element, the element of human sin, enters in beginning in chapter 7 and the conquest is humanly mitigated. So whereas chapter 6 talks about the walls falling because of the faithfulness of God, chapter 7 talks about the victories stalling because of Israel being unfaithful. Therefore I divide the first two sections between chapters 6 and 7.

The victories stall because Israel was unfaithful. Specifically it was Achan who was unfaithful when he was tempted to take that which was "under the ban." To be "under the ban" refers to items, or even whole cities, that were consecrated to God. And those items or cities were not to be used by human hands. They were either supposed to be destroyed or brought into the temple. Certain elements, such as gold, cannot be destroyed, so they were disposed of in another way by bringing them to the temple. Anything under the ban was not to be profited from by human beings.

Israel was later allowed to live in cities that they did not build. They did not destroy most of the cities that they captured. They were to dispossess them and destroy the human population or drive them out. But most of the cities that Israel took they did not destroy, so that Israel ended up living in cities they did not build and benefiting from vineyards that they did not plant, as was prophesied. Perhaps the reason that the first city they captured was placed under the ban was to make a point to Israel and to Canaan that this was not simply a selfish aggressive act on the part of the people of Israel. They did not merely see something that they wanted and then start a war to take it. The first big victory they experienced was not supposed to be the source of any profit to them. God had a purpose for His people and for the Canaanites, whose iniquity was now full and whose punishment was due.

Achan breached the ban by taking what he should not have taken. There are no sins hidden from God. While no one else knew he hid these things under his tent, God saw and it did bring trouble. It is a reminder of a time in my life, though I probably should not make personal confessions on tape, when I was in Paris by myself. When you are in a strange city by yourself, you can begin to act like you are not yourself. Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lead me not into temptation." That teaching is wise, and it is good that He did not have us say, "Make me strong no matter what temptations I march into." Jesus wanted us to know ourselves and pray that we would not be led into temptation. Being in a strange city where no one knows you, you may think it is your chance to take a walk on the wild side. Maybe you could go watch one of those movies you would not be caught dead going to in normal circumstances. Though I was tempted to do that, what helped me to resist the temptation was that I knew God would see. I had enough of a healthy fear of God and enough confidence in the sovereignty of God that I said to myself, "If I did that, the place would get raided or catch fire and it would be all over the newspapers." It was the fear of getting caught that kept me from going in. There are no sins hidden from God. Our sins have been paid for by Christ, so we are not constantly being punished for our sins. But God is a loving Father who does not allow us to go on willfully sinning without any reaction on His part. He will discipline us. And if that healthy respect for our heavenly Father causes us to be cautious in the moment of temptation, it is for our good. Our motivation should be one of love and gratitude for what He has done. But occasionally that love and gratitude, at least in my case, needs some additional help with a healthy dose of fear.

There are no sins that are hidden from God. Achan's sin was not hidden from God. There are also no sins that are completely personal and private sins. My wife was talking to a woman who was thinking of divorcing her husband and the woman said, "I have to do this for myself and for the good of my children." She seemed to not realize what havoc that might wreak upon other people. I could give another illustration from my own extended family involving a marriage separation. It is amazing to see the ripple effect of that one person's actions on so many others. There are no completely personal and private sins. What we do affects the lives of others. And what Achan did affected the life of his family. As head of that family, he did something that caused the deaths of his wife and children. That is certainly an important lesson to learn from that event.

Perhaps another lesson we can learn is that God does have the right over life and death. And perhaps there are worse things than losing our human lives. We always need to keep that in perspective. There are worse things that can happen to us than the loss of our mere human life. So we always need to trust God with the lives of the innocent parties, such as Achan's wife and children, who, as far as we know, were not complicit in his sin. But they did lose their lives because of his sins. There are no sins that are purely personal and private. They do always affect other people.

The Lord was angry and things were not going to go well. This was the occasion when Joshua sent out spies to Ai, and they brought back a positive report saying that taking the city should be easy. But they were defeated. Notice that they were acting on their human wisdom. They were not relying upon God. They were only looking at the situation and drawing their own seemingly logical conclusions, wanting to continue with their lives. Yet they found themselves in trouble.

In making that kind of observation, I am not suggesting that in seeking God's guidance for our lives we should always wait for something dramatic to happen. It is very rare for God to do that kind of thing. Most of the time, we live a life of faith and we walk by faith. And we say to God, "I want what you want." Then as we weigh various factors, we always keep God in the forefront of our considerations and we trust in Him as we make decisions. We do not simply make decisions based upon what we think is evident. We need to bring God to the center of our decisions. Then as we do that God will guide our decisions. He does not always do so in a dramatic way. Yet we need to be ever conscious that God leads us in our decision making.

Joshua had to learn that lesson, and he had to learn it more than once. He sent out the spies, who brought back a favorable report. He acted on the basis of that information-gathering, but he suffered a defeat as a result. This raised doubts in Joshua's mind. He began to feel sorry for himself in chapter 7. It says in Joshua 7:6, "Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, 'Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?'" Notice Joshua asked why the Lord delivered Israel over to the Amorites. Is that what God had done? No, but that is what Joshua was feeling. We have the same kinds of feelings sometimes. We ask, "Why did You bring me into this situation? Why did You do this to me?"

Then Joshua continues in verse 7, saying, "If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?" Joshua is saying that God's reputation is at stake. In a sense he is right. God's reputation is at stake in the lives of His people. Sometimes we need to

take that into account regarding our personal private sins. What we do reflects on the One we claim to serve.

Then the Lord answers Joshua, saying, "Stand up." That is an unusual command. Usually the command is to bow or take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground. But the Lord says in Joshua 7:10, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned." In other words, the Lord is telling Joshua, "Do not ask what I am doing. You should have asked, 'What have we done for You to remove Your favor, or to discipline us in this way?'" The Lord is prompting Joshua to begin asking those questions. Then the Lord says, "They have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things [that is, items that were under the ban]; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction."

If you took that which was devoted to destruction and had it in your possession, you became devoted to destruction. You were not supposed to touch it. But if you touch it, you become like it. You come under that ban yourself. Therefore God says in Joshua 7:12, "I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction." Through this exchange God brings Joshua back to his senses, which is what Joshua needed at that point. What follows is the lot-casting, which identifies Achan as the offender. Then there is the stoning of Achan. There was a price to pay for what he had done.

Then in chapter 8 we find the Lord encouraging Joshua after previously having to rebuke him. Joshua 8:1 says, "Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.'" Does that encouragement remind you of a previous instance? The Lord had said that to Joshua before. He is telling Joshua that things will be difficult sometimes. Sin will enter in, even his own sin, but he should not let it dash him. He is, after all, a human being, prone to wander, so he should not be surprised. Sometimes we are more critical of ourselves than we are of other people. When others sin, we may be able to forgive them or even feel compassion, but when we sin it is shocking to us. It is egocentric for us to think that it is expected for other people to sin but we are above it. We need to recognize how weak we are. We need to remember that Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead me not into temptation." We need to have a healthy disrespect for who we are. John Gerstner once said, "I do not know how low your opinion is of yourself, but however low it is it is far too high." That runs counter to the idea of the power of positive thinking. And we should feel good about ourselves in Christ. But we should feel horrible about ourselves in our fallen sinful nature.

When Joshua confronts Achan in Joshua 7:19 and says to him, "Give glory to God," it may be a way of telling him to make his peace with his maker. Achan needs to say, "What is about to happen to me is right. I did sin. I deserve this." Joshua's statement may be an indication that if Achan said those things, which the text does not say that he did, then we might be able to say that Achan was one of God's own that He took home early. That can happen. We can commit a crime that can cost us our lives.

In chapter 8 the Lord encourages His servant, then He gives victory. The king of Ai is captured, hanged, and buried under a pile of rocks. We begin to see the pattern of these stone memorials being erected. We have seen three of them. The first was the rocks that were stacked up after the crossing of the Jordan, in chapter 4. I interpret that as a memorial to God's faithfulness. The next memorial is the pile of stones raised over Achan and his family. That is a memorial to human faithlessness, or human sin. Then if we can interpret this pile of stones over the king of Ai, we might call it a memorial to Israel's second chance. God is a God of many chances. He does not always punish us as our sins deserve. He does give His people another chance. They do ultimately win victory over Ai. When we talk later about Saul, we

will see that the people sinfully demanded a king who was not God's choice. When they got that king, he caused them little else but grief. Then God gave them a king of His own choosing, a man after His own heart, and He gave the people another chance. He gave them the kind of king He would have given them in the first place.

At the end of chapter 8 we also have the stone altar at Mount Ebal. It is a covenant renewal after the initial setback. The Law of Moses is copied onto the stones and read to all the people. It was a reminder that when God said to be strong and very courageous, the point was to be courageous to obey the *torah*, the instruction, that Moses gave them. In this way the people are reminded what has brought them thus far and will continue to lead them and what they must follow.

Then in Joshua 9, Joshua spares a Canaanite city called Gibeon. The Gibeonites managed to trick the Israelites into thinking they were from a faraway place. So Israel makes a covenant with them, neglecting God's guidance. The text makes it explicit that they neglected God's guidance. Often the text leaves us to infer such things. But lest we miss the point, Joshua 9:14 says very explicitly, "The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord." That is a scary thought. They went ahead with something without inquiring of the Lord. They ended up making a covenant that they should never have made. This is a kind of passive unfaithfulness. It is a kind of self reliance that we need to be careful to avoid.

Having made this covenant, they are called upon in chapter 10 to fight for that Canaanite city. They should have been destroying the city. Instead they are fighting to defend a city that they should never have been defending. Their own misdeeds have brought them into this relationship. It is not too much of a stretch to say that they were unequally yoked together with the Canaanite city. They had to make the best of it. It would have been wrong for them to simply say they were not going to keep their word in their covenant. That would not have been right and proper either. They were deceived, but they did not inquire of the Lord. They had a way of knowing the truth, but they did not use it.

Notice Joshua 10:21, which describes the situation after they have won the victory on behalf of the Canaanite city. It says, "The whole army then returned safely to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah, and no one uttered a word against the Israelites." The Hebrew in that sentence could be translated strictly to say, "no one sharpened a tongue." It means that no one ridiculed them for what they had done. The only other place that this phrase is used, though it is translated differently, is in Exodus 11:7, which is dealing with the aftermath of the plagues in Egypt. Exodus 11:7 says, "But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal. Then you will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel." The parallel phrase there in Hebrew would be that "not a dog will sharpen its tongue." The verse emphasizes that God makes a distinction between His people and those who are not His people. It is possible that the narrator of Joshua is using this unusual turn of phrase as a subtle cross-reference back to Exodus 11:7. He is reminding the reader that God makes a distinction between His people and others, but the sinfulness of the Israelites is blurring that distinction.

There are many views about how the separation between God's people and the world should be lived out. In order to be totally separate from the world, we could have almost no association with anyone. But Jesus prayed that the Father would not take us out of the world, but that He would preserve us in the world. So we do live in the world. And we should live in the world. But we need to be careful that we do not become a Christianized version of the world. Our marching orders are in Scripture, and we need to hold up the culture in which we live to the light of Scripture. We need to question some of the things that go on in our culture. We need to question some of the extravagance of our lifestyle. Even if we do not have an extravagant lifestyle, most of us live on the edge. So we need to be careful not to assume

that we need something, when all we really do is want it. It is easy to get pressed into the mold of whatever neighborhood we live in. We might be happy with less, except that when our neighbors have more we feel bad about having less than them. We do need to make sure that we hold up our own culture to God's light. And we do not want to be unequally yoked to a culture that is not Christian.

Joshua fights for the Canaanite city, they win the victory, and when it is over Joshua encourages his commanders in a way that is reminiscent of the way God had encouraged him before. It is interesting that there is one significant omission. Joshua tells them in Joshua 10:25: "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous." It would have been better for Joshua to say, "Be very strong and courageous," so that he fully repeated what the Lord had said to Him. That would have signaled that they were going to proceed by following the Lord's instructions completely from that point on. I might be reading that too negatively, but I do see it as a possible danger signal.

Even while having the human element of sin come in, forestalling the conquest and making it more problematic, God is still faithful. God brings the conquest to successful completion. We may be reminded of what Paul says about God, that He "works all things together for those who love him, to those who are called according to his purposing." It is according to His choice, His design. I am not sure that I have always understood what that means. But it has to do with God's decision on our behalf. He works all things together, even including the false steps we make and the sins we commit. He somehow turns those to our benefit.

In this instance God does bring success in the southern campaign in the end of chapter 10. He brings success in the northern campaign in chapter 11. These are summarized very quickly. Then in Joshua 12 we have a summary of the campaign results. So the conquest is now consummated. It is done.

Throughout some of these chapters, we find instances of the writer using the phrase "to this day." For example, he says that the names of certain places have lasted or the memorial stones have stood "to this day." Certainly the Bible does not mean to tell us today that those things are still so. But it means that in the day the writer was compiling the book of Joshua, it is still so. It is an interesting phrase in Scripture. If you look at the book of Chronicles, it talks about the poles of the arc of the covenant in the temple being visible as they extended outside of the holy of holies "to this very day." We know, however, that the book of Chronicles was written to those who returned out of the Babylonian exile. The temple had been destroyed and the arc of the covenant was no more. So how could the writer of Chronicles say "to this very day?"

In that case the phrase means up to the time of the account on which the chronicler is drawing was written. We know that approximately 50% of the book of Chronicles makes use of the books of Samuel and Kings. While much of Chronicles is new and different, it is clearly a work in which someone is drawing upon historical sources. What we learn from a reference like this phrase "to this very day" is that it is helpful in dating the source material, but not necessarily in dating the final inscription of a particular passage.

You may be bothered by my talking about sources. Perhaps you should be bothered by that kind of talk. But the main problem with talking about sources is that source-critics are so interested in identifying those sources that they end up saying negative things about the text. But the notion that sources were used in the writing of Israel's history is apparent in the explicit references in the books of Chronicles, which cite earlier sources.

Now let us move on to Joshua 13-21, which describes the conquest allocated. Some things in these chapters, such as the areas yet to be dispossessed, I will discuss more fully later when we cover the book of Judges. It is interesting that the conquest is completed, consummated, yet there is a description in chapter 13 of the areas yet to be dispossessed. We learn that we need to make a distinction between the conquering of the land, the subjugation of the land—which is God’s doing—and the occupation or possession of the land. There is a military difference between winning the assault or battle in an area and then the coming in and occupying and holding the territory. What God does in giving Israel the land is give them the upper hand. No one is able to withstand them. Israel is in charge. That does not mean that every pocket has been completely purged of the Canaanite inhabitants. We will see how that helps us understand how Joshua and Judges fit together. It is important to understand that because often people see those two books in opposition to one another. They see that Joshua depicts a complete conquest, while Judges depicts a partial, faltering, and even unsuccessful affair. But if you read Joshua closely, you will see that it talks about the lands that are yet to be dispossessed and the work yet to be done.

Joshua 13 then goes on to talk about the division of the land to the east of the Jordan. Chapters 14-19 describe all the divisions of the lands to the west of the Jordan, which is the land of Israel proper. Land east of the Jordan is called “trans-Jordan” and land to the west of the Jordan is called “cis-Jordan.” One thing to note in looking at these divisions is that the first allocation is given to Caleb. Most of these allocations are given to tribes. Two individuals, however, receive properties. One is Caleb, who is given Hebron in Joshua 14:6-15. Then at the end of the allocations west of the Jordan, Joshua is given Timnath Serah. In Marten Woudstra’s commentary on Joshua, he points out the importance of this envelope structure to the account. The two faithful spies are specifically mentioned. They were true and faithful to God. They trusted that God could bring them into the land and He did bring them into the land. So they are specifically mentioned.

Joshua 20 recounts the allocation of the cities of refuge. Cities of refuge were places where someone who had killed another human could go to find safety. In those cities one would be protected until due process could take place. Otherwise, there was the *goel*, the kinsman-redeemer or the blood-avenger, who would go after you. There was a kind of justice that would be put rapidly into play, so there was a need for these cities of refuge. Those cities were nicely spaced throughout both trans-Jordan and cis-Jordan. They are described in several different passages in Scripture. And they are described in the way they would have been known and viewed at each juncture in Israel’s history. For instance, in Numbers 35:6-34, the Lord simply instructs Moses to set aside six Levitical cities for refuge, but He does not specify what those cities of refuge are to be. Then in Deuteronomy 4, when they are in the plains of Jordan, and trans-Jordan is well known to them, Moses sets aside the three cities of refuge east of the Jordan. In Deuteronomy 19 specific instructions are given for locating the cities of refuge in cis-Jordan. The order of events is just as we would expect if the people are coming into the land as the text describes it.

In Joshua 21 we are told about the Levitical allocations, where the cities of the Levites are to be. There are 48 of these cities, while there are only 6 cities of refuge. That is so people would have the instruction of religious personnel in their vicinity, people they could consult and who could be their teachers. Unfortunately, I do not know how active they were during the time of the judges. At least one Levite was much more concerned to keep his concubine interested. And overall it does not seem that much teaching was going on at that time.

At the end of Joshua 21 we find a concluding summary. Is it possible this concluding summary is overstated? Joshua 21:43 says, “So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just

as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled." You can understand how after reading that statement, people can be perplexed once they move to the book of Judges. We will consider it more carefully later.

Joshua 22-24 describes the conquest consecrated. The conquest has been initiated, mitigated, consummated, allocated, and now consecrated. In chapter 22 the account is told of the altar that was built by the two-and-a-half tribes that were returning to the east of the Jordan. When they built an altar, it disturbed the rest of Israel. They wondered if those tribes who went across the river would start worshipping other gods. But after the two-and-a-half tribes were rebuked, they made their defense that it was only a memorial altar. They said it did not mean that they were going to start worshipping at that place. It was meant as a marker to say that the God that Israel worshipped in cis-Jordan, they also worshipped in trans-Jordan. They did not want the natural geographic barrier of the Jordan to divide them as a people. So the altar that was built was a witness to God's relationship to all the tribes and to the unity of the people of Israel.

Joshua 23-24 contains Joshua's final words. Joshua's exhortations to the leaders are in chapter 23. He points out that the divine Warrior has gone before them and continues to do so. The land has been conquered and allotted, and now it is to be fully possessed. Joshua says in 23:4, "Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Great Sea in the west." The statement contains an interesting juxtaposition. If he is saying that these nations remain and they are allocated to you, it points to the fact that there is still work to be done. God had given them the upper hand, but the people were to go in and pursue the occupation of the land in faith.

You may have heard people use an expression about our standing in Christ: "you are, now be." We are to be, or to live as, what we truly are in Christ. We are not to try through human striving to become what we are not. We are children of God and we have the upper hand, and though the old nature does rear its ugly head, we are no longer slaves of sin. God says to us, "You are justified. You are no longer slaves to sin. Now begin to act like it." It is not that we defeat sin in our human effort. Rather, Christ defeats sin. So if we are no longer slaves, we should no longer continue to act like it. I am not preaching perfectionism, that you could achieve total sanctification in this life. But God is moving us toward sanctification.

We find the same kind of encouragement at the end of Joshua. Joshua says, "The land is yours. Now take it. Go in and make it yours." And he encourages them in terms that are reminiscent of the first chapter. He tells them in Joshua 23:6, "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left." He is telling them that doing things God's way, following His book, is going to be the most important factor.

Joshua 23:14-24:13 is the recounting of how God has been utterly faithful to His word and to His promises. Not a single promise He has made has failed. He has proven Himself even though Israel has at times failed and caused trouble. God has proven Himself and Israel should take that into account.

Then we have the final charge of Joshua to the people. He recounts what God has done and he exhorts the people to obey. Joshua speaks the famous lines in Joshua 24:15, saying, "If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." And the people respond confidently. They say, "Far

be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.” Does Joshua say, “That sounds great?” No, he responds in Joshua 24:19, saying, “You are not able to serve the Lord.” I am always taken aback by that statement. Joshua may be detecting and pointing out a bit of overconfidence in the people. He is warning them against thinking they can serve God in their own power. The Lord is a holy God and a jealous God, so almost good enough is not good enough. Almost getting it right is not enough to please the Lord. It is humanly impossible for them to please God through their striving and effort. God will not forgive even the slightest rebellion. He will not overlook what they do wrong.

Joshua wants them to change from an attitude of overconfidence to asking, “If it is that difficult, who can do it?” Remember Jesus once posed a question like that by His disciples. His response was, “With man these things are not possible, but with God anything is possible.” Joshua may have been trying to drive the people to a greater sense of dependence upon God, not on themselves. Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.” And the people replied, “Yes, we are witnesses.” I think they were still overconfident. It does not seem that they got the point. The failure to deal with their overconfidence comes to fruition in the book of Judges. But at the end of the book we have one final stone of witness to the people’s oath of covenant loyalty.

As we conclude our discussion of Joshua, I would like to attempt to make a provisional statement about the theme of the entire book. One idea might be that God will do what He says. That would be both an encouraging and a sobering thought. We probably want to include something about both God and His people. So we could say that God glorifies Himself even through the way He deals with His people when they sin. A good parent is not overly permissive. An overly permissive parent is not glorified in his children. It is the parent who, in love for those children, actually rears them and reinforces good behavior and disciplines misbehavior, who is glorified in his children.

I do not have one definitive theme for the book. But there are some ideas from the book that are essential to remember. God gives His people the land. Not a single promise He makes goes unfulfilled. God is completely true and He calls His people to trust Him. He is faithful even when we are sometimes faithless. God is true to His covenant people and He calls His covenant people to trust Him.