

Holy War

I will begin today by again rehearsing the kings of Israel and Judah. I want to repeat these kings from time to time, because repetition aids learning. I will first list the kings of Judah. These are the kings after the division of the kingdom. There were three kings in the tenth century, five in the ninth, five in the eighth, five in the seventh, and two in the sixth. The list begins with Rehoboam, followed by Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Athaliah, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manassah, Amon, Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedechiah. There were three kings of the northern kingdom of Israel in the tenth century, nine in the ninth, and eight in the eighth. Israel's kings begin with Jeroboam, followed by Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Tivni, Omri, Ahab, Ahaziah, Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, Jehoash, Jeroboam, Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekahiah, Pekah, and Hoshea.

I want to continue by talking about the first of two major debating points, which is the issue of holy war—another way to describe the issue is the genocide of the Canaanites and the command that they be annihilated. Many are troubled with what they read in Joshua. We want to understand how to assess this issue because we claim to worship a righteous, loving, merciful, and just God. So how can we justify this behavior of holy war?

One example is Joshua 6:21, which is the kind of verse that causes people consternation when they read the Old Testament and one reason why people are disenchanted with reading the Old Testament, so they avoid doing it. They just go to the New Testament. We read in Joshua 6:21, “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.” This goes significantly beyond the Geneva Convention and the protection of civilian life and the reservation of warfare to military personnel. Consider Joshua 8:25-26, which describes the aftermath of the victory over the city of Ai, “Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai.” It is easy to see how people can be disturbed by such descriptions.

Some merely rationalize this behavior as the mistaken notion of a primitive people living at a particular time. They were simply accommodating themselves to their surroundings in which everyone else was doing this too. They did not really know better, but through the progress of revelation we know that it was not God's will and they were simply mistaken. That does offer an escape route.

The problem is that the text does not allow us that interpretation. The text says that the annihilation of the Canaanites was at the specific command of Yahweh Himself. Joshua 10:40 says, “So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded.” What Joshua did was God's command. Consider Joshua 11:12, “Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded.” Is that command from Moses recorded somewhere in Scripture? Deuteronomy 20:16 says, “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 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 worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.”

In 1 Samuel 15, Samuel will tell Saul that he must place the Amalekites under the ban. This is because the Amalekites resisted the people of God when they came out of Egypt. At that time, God told the Amalekites they were under a curse because of what they had done to His people. The command in 1 Samuel 15 is the fulfillment of that curse. And it shows, along with all these other passages, that God is behind this. We need to understand what is going on. C. S. Lewis has one of the characters in the *Chronicles of Narnia* say, "Aslan is not a tame lion." Sometimes we think God is a tame God. We think He is Someone we can make in our image and likeness. But God is God. He has a reality of His own. We do not create Him in our minds. So we need to understand who He is and what motivates these kinds of actions. How could He make these kinds of commands?

Let me move from this biblical problem that we have been considering to some biblical principles that will help us, at least in part, to understand. I am not claiming we will fully understand or feel fully comfortable with this, but it will help us begin to understand. The first principle I find in Scripture is that the slaughter is particularized. I think it is fair to use the word "slaughter." The annihilation, the ban, the order that these people be destroyed, was particularized. It was not indiscriminate. They were not to go in as a marauding band. It was particularized.

When we read Deuteronomy 20:16 earlier, you may have noticed that it began with the word "however." When a verse begins with "however," you have to look back at what came before it. Deuteronomy 20:10 says, "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies." That last statement raises another issue, which is difficult in itself. But you have to consider the alternative. If the men, who are the combatants, are to be killed for their unwillingness to make peace, what else was to be done with their families? It was more merciful to take them into the people of God than to just leave them there at the mercy of the next band of travelers that might come along. Deuteronomy 20:15 continues, "This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby." Thus we see that when God commands the destruction of a people, it is not that God just wants the Israelites to go around destroying people wherever they can. He has a specific program for those cities that are at a distance from the Promised Land. He has a different program for those cities that are within the Promised Land. It is not indiscriminate destruction. It is a particularized command that certain populations be driven out or destroyed.

The next principle we see in Scripture regarding this issue is that the slaughter had a purpose. It was not senseless slaughter. Deuteronomy 20:18 gave one of the purposes: "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." The Canaanites need to be driven out or destroyed so they do not pose that threat or temptation to God's people. This is the principle of protection from idolatry or apostasy, protection from falling away from God. We do not adopt that procedure today, of course, or at least we should not. There are an unfortunate few who do. But that is not what we are called to do today. We should be careful to what extent we live amongst and walk according to the counsel of the wicked. We need to guard the gates of our minds and hearts so we are not constantly allowing these foreign forces into our minds and hearts. Otherwise we may begin to become like them.

Deuteronomy 7:2 is also related to this notion of protection. After naming seven of the nations that already occupy the Promised Land, Moses tells the people,

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. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, 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. 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. 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.

One of the purposes of the destruction of the Canaanite population was so that God might protect His treasured possession from that which would tempt them to depart from Him, the only source of good. To move a step away from God is to move a step away from light into darkness. It is to move a step away from that which is good to that which is less good, and ultimately evil. So protection was one of the purposes.

There was another purpose. Protection alone might not have justified the annihilation of the Canaanites. The other purpose was punishment or judgment upon the Canaanites. This is alluded to as early as Genesis 15 when God made that first covenant with Abraham. God tells Abram that he will eventually inhabit the land of Canaan. Remember the call of Abram involved the promise of descendants, that he would become a great nation. In order to have a great nation he would need a place to stay, so he would have a land. And he would also be blessed, and he himself would be a blessing. That is, through his line he would be a blessing to all other nations. In the process of covenant making in Genesis 15, God specifies where Abram's land will be. Genesis 15:16 says, "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." God is waiting until the cup of iniquity is full. He does not strike too soon. He does not strike when it is undeserved. He does not strike while a situation is still redeemable. He waits until their iniquity is full and it is the proper time for them to be judged. Archaeological studies have shed considerable light on the nature of Canaanite religion. A famous archaeologist, William F. Albright, once described Canaanite religion as "perhaps the most depraved religion known to man." We have the privilege now of watching television, so we might be able to come up with something worse. But there was a certain depravity to this religion. It was a fertility religion. It involved ritual prostitution, child sacrifice, and the kinds of things that are rather horrible.

There is in these days an attempt to rewrite the history books and reinterpret the data. There are symbols and fertility figurines that were once used to represent a debased fertility religion. They were the kinds of things that God felt was anathema and that which He told His people to free themselves from. In this day there is a movement afoot to say that those religions were not so bad. It is now said that the problem is that all the archaeologists who have written about them are male. Those male archaeologists do not appreciate women's spirituality. Be on the lookout for that, because it is rewriting the interpretation of the archaeological evidence. It is not denying it is there. But it is beginning to try to turn us back to the worship of things that are not so much "new age" as they are old paganism resurfacing.

Another thing that is important to notice about the purposes of God's order that the Canaanites be destroyed is that He goes out of His way to be clear that it is not because the Israelites are so righteous. He does not say He is doing this to them because the Israelites are so much better by comparison. In Deuteronomy 9:4 Moses is anticipating the time when Israel will enter the Promised Land. He says, "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. 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. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.” It begins to get repetitious, and that is for a purpose. When God blesses us, it is so tempting to think that, while we know about grace, there must have been some action or decision along the way that made us worth being blessed. We are tempted to think in those terms. But when God gives us the inheritance of being His treasured possession, He wants us to be sure that it is not because of our righteousness. All of our righteousness is like filthy rags. We are just like the Israelites, a stiff-necked people. It makes us all the more grateful for God’s sovereign work in our lives because we would never have turned to Him if He had not turned to us.

So the slaughter, annihilation, genocide, of the Canaanites was particularized, not indiscriminate. It was purposive; there were several reasons for it. It was for protection of God’s treasured possession. And it was for the punishment or judgment of those whose iniquity was full.

One other feature of the biblical material that we need to stress is that what we read is not a pattern for today. It is not a program of Christian combat that we are to embark upon, except perhaps in the sense that Paul put it. We struggle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against those forces of wickedness in high places. I do not think he is talking about high political office. Our warfare is really a spiritual warfare that we fight through prayer and submission to God and obedience to Him. We fight it through reaching out to others who are in darkness.

What we are reading about in the Old Testament’s description of this period of history is something that is called *cherem*, which means “holy war.” The verb from which we get the noun *cherem* means “to ban,” “to devote to destruction,” or “to utterly destroy” something. So when we talk about *cherem*, the holy war, we are talking about God placing under the ban, or placing under the order to destroy, a certain city or a certain people. The idea is that what is taken is not to be taken by human hands. It is to be destroyed, if it can be destroyed, so that it is not something by which humans profit. Or it is to be devoted to God, because certain things cannot be destroyed like gold and silver or vessels of brass and iron. You can melt those things down, but then people would be digging it out of the ground. When an item like that is placed under the ban it is to be brought to the temple.

One of my colleagues, Dr. Robert Vasholz, has suggested a helpful insight about these matters. One of the reasons for putting an entire city, like Jericho, under the ban was to make something apparent to the inhabitants of the land, who were receiving their just judgment. It was also to make something apparent to the Israelites. Their entry into the land and their purpose for being there was not merely for self-enrichment. They conquered a city in which there were many things, but they were not to receive any of them. There was a larger issue involved than what they might gain from the conquering of that city. Once that point was made, however, in the case of other cities God did say the population was to be driven out or destroyed, that is dispossessed, but their possessions were for the people to enjoy. So after the point was made, God did allow His people to inhabit cities they did not build and harvest from vineyards they had not planted.

As we think about this issue of holy war, it brings us to the issue of intrusion ethics. The theologian Meredith Kline has written helpfully on this issue. He makes a clear distinction between the period of common grace and the time of the consummation, the wrapping up of this world as we know it, the period of final judgment. Common grace is the idea that we and others are still alive despite our sinfulness. It is the idea that the rain falls on the wicked as well as on the righteous. Common grace is

distinguished from special grace, which is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives to bring us from death to life. We are dead in sins apart from the Holy Spirit in our lives, so it is a measure of special grace when God reaches down into our lives and regenerates those who are dead in sin. Special grace is enjoyed only by those who are God's children by His choice. Common grace is something that everyone in this world enjoys. We live in a period of common grace, when, though we are sinful, God is staying His hand, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. He is being patient with us. There will come a time, however, which is the consummation, in which God will execute final judgment for sin upon those who are not His people.

Kline says that various aspects of Old Testament ethics are intrusions of the ethics of the consummation into the period of common grace in which we live. One example is the use of imprecations in the psalms, which are the calling down of oaths upon one's enemies. This is done because the psalmist is God's representative, so his enemies are God's enemies. The annihilation of the Canaanites is another example. Kline says that some of the actions ordered by God in the Old Testament represent "an anticipatory abrogation of the principle of common grace." It is not that God has different standards for different ages, but that He applies a constant standard under significantly different conditions. At present, the consummation is delayed by a period of common grace when we are called upon to love our enemy. When the final judgment comes and the consummation arrives, we will be called upon by our God in hating sin and the products of sin. There will come a time when the wheat and the tares will be separated. But right now, we do not know the wheat from the tares. We have an idea of who some of the wheat are. And we have an idea of who appear to be tares. But we do not know if those are tares that God might, by His grace, turn into wheat. We do not know, so we are called upon to love our enemies in this age of common grace.

If we think of this notion of intrusion ethics in relation to the conquest, we begin to see that the conquest itself is an example of intrusion ethics. The book of Joshua does not present a program or justification for warfare in our day. These events in the Old Testament, as well as events in our own lives, must be viewed in the sweep of redemptive history. Kline says, "The conquest, with the pattern of the Old Testament action it exemplifies, was not, as is so often stigmatized, an instance in the ethical sphere of arrested evolution, but rather of anticipated eschatology." In other words, the conquest is not merely ethical underdevelopment or a primitive mindset. Rather, it is an anticipation of the final judgment. If you think about it, the conquest is not the only instance of this. You have the flood, which is an intrusion of judgment into the period of common grace. You have an isolated instance in the death of Uzzah, who reached out and touched the ark, which was being carted when it should have been carried on poles. He may have been sincere in trying to do right, but God needed to make a point, so He made a point by taking Uzzah's life. God is in charge of that life. For all we know, God may have ushered Uzzah directly into eternal life, so God may not have done him a disservice at all. Still, we are shocked by such occurrences. We might observe the instance of Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament. They lied to the Holy Spirit when they sold a parcel of land and brought part of the proceeds but said it was all of the proceeds. God does not strike us dead every time we do something stupid like that, but in the case of Ananias and Sapphira He had to make a point.

This is not just Old Testament ethics. Luke 13 records a curious instance in the life of Jesus that has a lesson for us today when we see disasters occur in the world, whether manmade or natural. When those things happen, many people wonder what is going on in the world. Jesus offers a response when people ask Him that kind of question. Luke 13:1 tells us, "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." That was a criminal act. Notice that Jesus did not answer by saying, "Those poor unfortunate people just happened to be in that building. But think of all the wonderful people who came out to help them and how humanity banded

together. That proves that even though there are bad people, there are good people too.” That is often the response to tragedies in our day. But Jesus did not say anything like that. Luke 13:2 says, “Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’” Those are not exactly words of comfort. Then Jesus continues, “Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them,” that is more like a natural disaster than the previous scenario. And Jesus responds, “Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

The point is, when these bad things happen in life, we should take them as warnings that unrepentant sinners, those who are outside of Christ, are heading for something much worse than any natural disaster we can imagine. They are heading for final judgment and an eternity in hell. We should respond in the same way Jesus does. Do not think there was something special about those people that they suffered this way. They were not worse sinners than others. But it is not that anybody is not a sinner. Rather, we are all sinners and we are all heading toward hell unless we repent. Outside of Christ that is the fate that awaits us all. So Jesus takes a tragic event and does not sugarcoat it, but uses it as an example to point out the reality of human lives that are very desperately in need of Christ.

As Jesus continues, He tells a parable that relates directly to this issue of intrusion ethics. We read in Luke 13:6, “Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and have not found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’” “Sir,” the man replied, “Leave it alone for one more year, and I will dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”” The fig tree in Jesus’ parable is enjoying common grace, but it is in danger of judgment. It is a fruitless fig tree, or we might say it is an unrepentant fig tree. It gets one more year before it is cut down, which is one more year of common grace. If it bears fruit, that is fine. If it does not bear fruit, then it will be cut down.

The main idea of this lecture has been to point out the ethics of the consummation being intruded in the flood, the genocide of the Canaanites at God’s command, the death of Uzzah, and the death of Ananias and Sapphira. There are a number of other occurrences, but these are far from common. This is not what commonly happens every time someone sins. But occasionally God makes a statement, saying, “This kind of sin is leading to judgment.”

I do not claim that the principles I have discussed today totally solve the issue of the annihilation of the Canaanites. But these are some biblical principles to keep in mind. It was particularized. It was with purpose, both protection and punishment. It was not a pattern for today. It was an instance of intrusion ethics that only God can command. We do not dare say that we are the agents of judgment. God is the One in charge of judgment. If we feel that He has designated us to take up arms and become the agents of judgment, we probably better think again. We need to be very careful in that area, because there are those who have taken it upon themselves to use guns or other means to become agents of judgment. But we are called upon to love our enemies in this period of common grace. It is not our decision when final judgment is intruded. We must continue to operate on the basis of common grace and let judgment be at God’s command.

Consider even the Book of Psalms, which is the prayer book of the church. Some of the psalms contain imprecations, or curses called down upon the psalmist’s enemies, and we must understand how they apply today. If we look at the psalms closely, we discover that they are not concerned with personal vengeance, but with God’s righteousness. Many of them were prayed by the king. King David wrote

more imprecations in the psalms than anyone else. The king in Israel was God's representative on earth, so treason against the king was not simply political treason. It was rebellion against God in the person of His representative there. There is a Godward focus as the psalmist cries out for God to bring justice and for Him to punish the evildoer, that He would bring upon their heads what they deserve. That is a constant element in the imprecations of the psalms. There is a balancing of the offense with what God should do to them as a consequence. In one imprecatory psalm it says, "They are full of curses, and they never bless." So the psalmist says, "Let them be cursed and far from blessing." In other words, "Give them what they are giving." Another important thing is to consider the alternatives to the imprecations. When we are really mad, what are our alternatives? We can take matters into our own hands and exact a personal vengeance. We can carry out an extreme reaction and do something horrible. Or we can take it to God and trust that He will right all wrongs because He is the righteous Judge. That is the better way. So there are good aspects to the imprecations.