

Violence & the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to be in the book of Joshua, starting in chapter 6. Now, if you've been following along with us for several weeks, forgive us if you've just come for the first time today, but you'll notice that last week I took us to a thing and then said, we'll deal with that next week.

Because this book, this story of the people of Israel who've been wandering in the wilderness, and they've come into the land that they were promised, and then they start to go in and take possession of that land, except there are people living there.

So we end up with lots of wars. We end up with sieges. We end up with the people of Israel killing lots of people who are currently living there. We end up with a remarkable amount of violence. And it can make us think, what are we supposed to do with this?

We claim this is God's word. How do we respond to these incredibly challenging passages? That's what we're going to look at today. My message is called Violence in the Gospel, and we are going to look right in the face all of this stuff that we find in the Old Testament where the people of God seem to kill lots of people and consider, how should we feel about that?

How should we think about that? What is our kind of theological framework for it? The violence makes many of us uncomfortable, which is actually a sign of how much the Jesus revolution has changed the world, because it wouldn't have made anyone uncomfortable two and a half thousand years ago.

[1 : 1 9] But, like I said, we're going to try and look it full in the face. I'm going to start reading in Joshua chapter 6, and I'm just going to deliberately read some sections from chapter 6, chapter 8, chapter 10, chapter 11, that are all the hard bits we'd rather weren't there.

Just in a run, and you're all going to feel like, oh no, at the end of it, and then we're going to start to think about what on earth we do with that. So, I'm going to jump around a bit. These little bits will be on the screen, but I can't tell you where I am.

So, Joshua 6. I read last week the story of Jericho. I stopped before the end of a paragraph, because it says right at the end, then they devoted all in the city to destruction. This is verse 21. Both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword. Dropping down to verse 24. And they burned the city with fire and everything in it.

Only the silver and gold and the vessels of bronze and iron they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. But Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua, saved alive.

[2 : 2 0] And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho. And we know that's true from the archaeology. You can see Jericho, you know, people we know it was burned with fire at exactly this point in history.

Let's skip to Joshua chapter 8 and verse 24. Which is after the battle of Ai. So, they approach, we'll hear a bit more about this next week, but they approach a city called Ai. They lose, and they discover why they lost, because they didn't do what God told them to, and then, which Andrew will speak on next week, and then they eventually fight and win.

Verse 24. When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued him, and all of them, to the very last, had fallen to the edge of the sword, and all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai.

But Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the javelin, until he had devoted to all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction. Only the livestock and spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the word of the Lord that he commanded Joshua.

So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening.

[3 : 39] And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.

And then skipping to chapter 10. I'm going to read from verse 29. This is the conquest of the southern part of what later becomes Israel.

Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Machedah to Libna and fought against Libna.

And the Lord gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel.

And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it he left non-remaining in it. And he did to its king, as he had done to the king of Jericho. Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Libna to Lachish and laid siege to it and fought against it.

And the Lord gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he captured it on the second day and struck it with the edge of the sword and every person in it, as he had done to Libna. Then Horem, king of Geza, came up against Lachish, and Joshua struck him and all his people until he left non-remaining.

[4 : 48] And then Joshua and all Israel passed with him from Lachish to Eglon, and they laid siege to it and fought against it. And they captured it on that day and struck it with the edge of the sword, and he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had to Lachish.

Gosh. Then Joshua and all Israel with him went from Eglon to Hebron, and they fought against it and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and its king and its towns and every person in it. He left non-remaining, as he had to Eglon, and devoted it to destruction and every person in it. Then Joshua and all Israel with it, and it goes on, and I'm not going to read all of that section, but it goes on and on and on, and drop into chapter 11. Read from verse 10, now in the northern part of what is later Israel.

And Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms, and they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction.

There were none left that breathed, and he burned Hazor with fire. And all the cities of those kings and all their kings, Joshua captured, and struck them with the edge of the sword, devoting them to destruction, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, had commanded.

[5 : 58] But none of the cities that stood on mounds did Israel burn, except Hazor alone. That's Joshua burned. And all the spoil of these cities and the livestock the people of Israel took for their plunder, but every person they struck with the edge of the sword until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any who breathed, just as the Lord had commanded Moses, his servant.

So Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did. He left nothing undone of all the Lord had commanded Moses. So Joshua took all that land, the hill country and the Negev and all the land of Goshin and the lowland and the Arabah and the hill country of Israel and its lowland from Mount Halak, which rises towards Seir and is filed by Al-Gadad in the valley of Lebanon and below Mount Hermon.

And he captured all their kings and struck them and put them to death. Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon, and they took them in a battle.

If it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed just as the Lord had commanded Moses.

This is the word of the Lord. And there isn't a murmur of thanks be to God. So what do we do with that? Okay, I've just read in a run selections from a series of chapters, lots of things happen in between those but on the face of it they make most of us feel at least cold.

[7 : 32] Okay, again, that narration takes place over something like five or six years rather than like literally back to back like I've just read it to you but still, how do we respond to it?

Well, let me start with a few things about what is not going on which doesn't solve the problems for us but just sort of slightly contextualizes it. So to start with, this is not, where we sit it is very easy to look at this and think, oh, essentially this is colonialism.

You know, it's what happens in South America, it's what happened in Africa, it's what many European nations did around the world. A small group of highly skilled and better armed people go in and they conquer and they wipe out the inhabitants and they take it for their own.

Is this that? It's not and in fact it's the opposite of that and the reason it's the opposite is because the Hebrew people here, Israel, are former slave people.

They've left Egypt as an enslaved people. They have slings and sticks and stones and the people they're fighting have, it's the late Bronze Age so we're not talking super fancy armaments but they have spears and swords and chariots which is the sort of military equivalent of the nuclear weapon these days.

[8 : 42] It's the best thing that they've got at that particular time so they are, they don't have better weapons and they're against as it were empire.

They're against empire. Canaan as we'll see in a little bit is a kind of outpost of empire and that is not who they are. They are if you like going up against Fort Knox with a water pistol.

They are a people who've got a super soaker against a bunch of people with AK-47s. On the face of it you would not expect the kind of narration that the Bible gives. They are not well armed.

They are not well trained in warfare and if you read their battle plans as we did last week we looked at Jericho they are largely ridiculous. They don't make sense.

They are not the kind of plans that would actually win. Of course the point the book of Joshua wants to make is that's because they don't work but God fights for them. But Israel are the weak.

[9 : 41] Israel are the weaker party compared to the Canaanites on pretty much any measure you could get. Now that doesn't solve our challenge but it puts in a little bit of context. The second thing to think so I started by reading in chapter 6 I read verse 21 they devoted all in the city to destruction the men and women young and old oxen sheep and donkeys with the edge of the sword.

That phrase men and women young and old oxen sheep and donkeys is an idiom. It's a phrase people would say it doesn't mean exactly what it says. It's a little bit like if I said on my street last night was Uncle Tom Cobbley and all.

Now there were what was on my street last night was a lot of police I don't know what was going on but a car and a van and many police but it wasn't no one out there was my Uncle Tom I don't have an Uncle Tom I don't imagine anyone out there was called Tom Cobbley and it wasn't literally all the people in the world.

But you know if I say the phrase Uncle Tom Cobbley and all I just mean a lot of people and the Hebrew phrase men and women young and old oxen sheep and donkeys or even sometimes just men and women just means lots of people.

It doesn't necessarily mean literally everyone. It is very unlikely in Jericho as we touched on last week that there were many women or that there were many children in fact to be honest it's most likely that Rahab's family were the only women were the only non-combatants there at all to military fought and they're the people who get saved.

[11 : 08] When we read city in Joshua we should picture a small military fort not London and when we meet king we should when we read king we should think military chief not King Charles.

But the challenge is even if that is the case or sorry even if that's not the case even if I'm even if we're incorrectly reading the history and there were non-combatants there it is true according to the Bible that there are no innocents and that we'll return to this a little bit later but that God does have the right to choose who lives and dies and that feels very hard to us.

The second sorry the third thing to notice is that they the book of Joshua engages significantly in bronze age trash talk uses phrases like we destroyed them we annihilated them we where are we verse chapter 10 oh yeah we wiped them out chapter 10 verse 20 we wiped them out until they were wiped out that is a little bit like if you watched football yesterday and you said we destroyed them and the final score was 3-2 right like you won that's what you mean is you mean you won you do not if you said we absolutely annihilated them you do not mean that the football players were dead on the field you mean we beat them at football like there is an element here of trash talk and that can sound strange because we might be like hang on don't we believe this is the word of God isn't that isn't that lying to say oh we destroyed them and you didn't literally destroy them and so the two things we need to know are first very common in the bronze age every empire around would be in fact

I think I think Midian on several of their inscriptions that we found would be like we destroyed all of Israel well clearly they didn't but that is the way people would talk and so therefore readers in the original context would absolutely know that it was a little bit like saying about the football we destroyed them and that wasn't quite the case however you might be like but how can we know that the text actually tells us so I've turned to chapter 10 chapter 10 verse 20 when Joshua and the sons

of Israel had finished striking them with a great blow until they were wiped out these five Amorite kings and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the fortified cities then all the people returned safe to Joshua at the camp at Makedah did you catch that when Joshua and the sons of Israel had finished striking with a great blow until they were wiped out none of them left and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the cities we wiped all of them out but those of them that were left they went and did this the text knows that's one sentence this is not even two things put together by editors in different places no they've made a mistake it's one sentence the writer knows exactly what they're doing they do not expect us to read wiped out and think they killed everybody they expect us to read wiped out and think they won a battle and they know that because in the rest of the sentence they clearly act like that's a very reasonable thing to think because there's some of them left and they're going to the cities so this is a weak people who when they say they killed everyone they mean they killed lots of people and when they say they destroyed them all they mean they won a battle however on the faith there are lots more what I'd like to do with the rest of my message is kind of turn to thinking about why is it okay that God said they should kill anyone rather than focus on that but there are lots more questions you can ask about the book of Joshua and exactly what's going on and if you're like

I'd like to read more about that I'm not quite sure I get it then there's a book that I could recommend to you to read if you'd like it's called *The Skeletons in God's Closet* and the subtitle is *The Mercy of Hell The Surprise of Judgment and the Hope of Holy War* and that is the argument of the book that hell is merciful judgment is surprising and holy war is hopeful but I wouldn't agree with literally everything in it but I would recommend it to you as a good guide to thinking through the book of Joshua if you're interested in doing that so even if that's the case even if it is true they didn't literally kill everyone even if it is true we're not talking about them literally killing all the children in each city why is this in the Bible and what are we supposed to do with it so the first thing we need to consider is that God hates injustice and he's very comfortable being violent against violence I suspect if we actually think about it most of us are actually quite comfortable with being violent against violence as well

[16:15] God is a God who goes to war against war the Bible repeatedly in so many places it's not worth me trying to turn to them all would promise that God will crush those who let the root of hell grow from their hearts because hell is a great tree and it has its roots in people's hearts all injustice and evil in the world grows out of people's hearts the Bible's challenge to us is that repeatedly it says that it grows out of all of our hearts that all of us can find something of the root of hell within us before Joshua way back when quite in the beginning of the Bible's story of the world God meets a man called Abraham he's living in a city called Ur at the time it's later called Babylon and he says to him why don't you come and follow me where are we going I don't know just follow me and I'll take you to a land that's better than this so Abraham thinks alright and he starts to follow him and eventually

God leads Abraham to this land that they are now taking that was at a time called Canaan we'd now probably refer to most of it as Israel that the book of Joshua is describing and when Abraham gets there he doesn't conquer it or take possession of it but most of the inhabitants greet him well many of them come to worship God as a result of his conversations with them and in Genesis 15 he's promised that one day his descendants will take this land and it will be theirs but God says that'll be in about 500 years time got about 100 more years of wandering around it and then you're going to have 400 years of being slaves in Egypt and then you can come and have it which feels like an odd promise but God gives a reason he says because the sins of the Amorites that's one of the people who are living there the sins of the Amorites are not yet complete in other words God says you can have it but I want to wait 500 years to be patient with the people who live there to give them opportunity to repent and turn back from the way that they're living and then what happens over the next 500 years is yes

Abraham and his descendants wander around for about 100 years and then end up in Egypt and then end up as slaves in Egypt about 400 years but in that 500 years people come from Babylon almost like they follow Abraham and this empire that's just beginning to be an empire at this time it's not the world dominating what it later became but they move into Canaan with all the practices of empire and all the evil that that city had and they fill it with it the people of Canaan practice many things that we would consider evil including lots of child sacrifice they are rapacious and violent and the Lord is against them and they choose not to repent but also what we see here in one sense is

the central conflict of the Bible which is the people of the snake against the people of God which is empire and city against the people and their land which is strong versus weak and God is on the side of the weak he waited 500 years for them to repent because the Lord is patient he's the same with us right we're told in Romans chapter 2 that God's kindness is what leads us to repentance his patience the fact that he doesn't as soon as we do something wrong immediately crush us as he has every right but is instead

I want to be patient that you might come to understand what you've done and that you might turn to me and follow me it's the same with these people he's patient with them and eventually it results in judgment but at the end of a long period of patience more than that God hates injustice so much that he caused the worst act of violence in history I wonder if you've thought about it like that because what happens on the cross is that the father crushes the son and God is killed by human men that is the worst act of violence that has ever happened that's how the Bible would view it did you notice when I read earlier in chapter 8 of Joshua that they kill this king of Ai verse 29 chapter 8 they hang the king on a tree until evening and then they throw him in a tomb and roll a stone over the front of it

I mean does that sound like anything to you we're supposed to read these passages and go hang on Jesus died in the place of the kings how does that work I didn't read this bit but in chapter 10 in verse 26 just after they wiped everyone out that they didn't wipe out it says and afterwards Joshua struck them and put them to death and he hung them on five trees and they hung on the trees until evening but at the time of the going down to the sun Joshua commanded they turned them down from the trees and they threw them in the cave where they'd hidden themselves and they put a large stone over the mouth which remains there to this day again what happens to these military chiefs they're hung on trees as in they're crucified sorry slightly before that but something very similar to crucifixion and then they're put in tombs and have the stones rolled over Jesus is killed in the same way that these ancient kings were what are we supposed to think there we're supposed to see that in the lens of God's patience because we're those kings in the story we're not

[22 : 17] Joshua Jesus comes to die in our place as part of God's patience with us so that if we trust him we find that we are never faced the consequence of what we've done God's patience is so long to allow us to repent he even came himself to stand in your place we're not Israel in the story we're the kings and then if we trust in Jesus brought into the people of God some of us might be tempted to think that the Old Testament depiction of God is bloodthirsty angry he likes it when we go around and destroy cities and the New Testament depiction of God is very different it is kind and gracious that's not true well at least all those statements to some extent are true but putting them against each other isn't true the God in the Old Testament is depicted as a God of kindness and grace and patience who believes in justice

God of the New Testament is righteous and has anger against injustice as actually if we listen to the words of Jesus in the Gospels we will notice but let me read to you right from the end of the Bible it describes what will happen when Jesus returns and indeed what he'll look like when he returns this is Revelation chapter 19 I'm going to read from verse 11 then I saw this is John reporting his vision then I saw heaven opened and behold a white horse the one sitting on it is called faithful and true and in righteousness he judges and makes war his eyes are like a flame of fire and on his head are many diadems or crowns and he has a name written that no one knows but himself he is clothed in a robe dipped in blood it's not his own and the name by which he's called is the word of God and the armies of heaven are reigned in fine linen white and pure while following him on white horses and from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations and he will rule them with a rod that's like a shepherd's rod but a rod of iron and he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the almighty on his robe and on his thigh he has a name written king of kings and lord of lords

Jesus returning at the end of history is a warrior where his mouth is his sword tattooed on his thigh king of kings and lord of lords he is here to bring the fury of God almighty the white horse rider returns we met him last week outside Jericho this is the guy that Joshua met outside in the plain he's like you want our side or their side and he looks at him and says no and he gave them their battle plan that made no sense and it took them to conquer it he is patient with his creation but he will return as a man of war which is some of us might think oh no is this like are we supposed to be scared by this or it depends whether you're on his side or not but I think it's actually phenomenally good news and that might sound strange to us but the reason that I think this is good news is

because what does Jesus return to make war against he comes to make war with war he comes to make war with the root of hell he comes to make war with everything that is wrong in the world he comes to end everything that is evil and inaugurate a new creation where he'll wipe away every tear from every eye and everything will be good forevermore it is the end of injustice as the enemy and every foul demonic power ends it is the end of slavery it's the end of child abuse it's the end of tyranny and exploitation and rebellion it's the end of materialism it is the end of justifying anything in pursuit of profit it is the end of doing it because we can it's the end of envy of lying of adultery of theft of murder of dishonoring parents of a refusal to rest of striving to be God of idolatry and of false worship it's the end of all sin it's the end of hell it's the end of death it's good news we might have lots of feelings about war in the old testament and I will not have answered all of your questions and it's good to press into them but the white horse rider returns to end evil and injustice and death and we'll make war on any who perpetrate those things our challenge is that that's us until we trust him and join his people do you have the band this is good news for us to respond in gladness for the

God who makes war against war he rides against the root of hell that grows in our hearts he rides against death itself let me read to you from 1 corinthians 15 there'll be familiar words to many and then in a moment we will sing in worship to this God who rides against injustice against evil and against death says when the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality then shall come to pass the saying that is written death is swallowed up in victory oh death where is your victory this is the Old Testament equivalent of who are you literally death where is your victory oh death where is your sting the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ therefore my beloved brothers be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord knowing in the Lord your labor is not in vain death where is your victory he's lost death is lost satan is lost the enemies lost hell is lost sins lost shame is lost everything evil you could possibly imagine lost and the white horse rider will return stained in the blood of his enemies to make that final says right at the beginning of the bible that the snake will one day bite his heel but in so doing his foot will crush the snake's head that satan's attempt to end everything in the crucifixion of jesus results in jesus foot coming down that's good news why don't we stand together if we're able and we'll sing