

The Commander of The Army of The Lord

(Joshua 5:13 – 6:5)

Summary

Israel's conquest of the Promised Land makes for difficult reading, so it's important that we know what really happened and why. Along with explaining this, Luke looks at the parallels and differences between the mission Joshua was given, and the one that we have been given by Jesus.

Questions for small group discussion (please choose which are best for your group)

If you have read the book of Joshua before, how have you tended to respond to the conquest?

How did what Luke said on Sunday help you to be clearer on what was happening and why?

How would you explain the goodness in God's judgement to someone you know well who isn't a Christian?

The New Testament is clear that we no longer fight with the weapons of earthly warfare. We would probably all agree on "no swords", but what other "worldly" methods might we be tempted to use to advance God's Kingdom? What are the weapons we are supposed to use, and what are the attitudes that we are supposed to use them with? (See 2 Corinthians 4:2, 4:7, 10:3-4, and Ephesians 6:10-20 for help with this.)

The parallels between Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Jesus, and the church, are meant to encourage us that we are in continuity with God's purposes throughout history. How does this strengthen your faith for what He has called you, and us as a church, to do?

Prayer is a key weapon, so let's use it now. Share situations where you need breakthrough in telling people about Jesus's good news of liberation.

For a single article on the conquest, see "[Is YHWH A War Criminal?](#)" by Alastair Roberts.

For the Abraham and Jubilee parallels, see Peter Leithart [here](#) and [here](#) respectively.

Full notes with all quotes references

Part 1: Explaining the conquest

Sometimes in the Bible, people do questionable or even awful things, and we can rightly say, "Just because the Bible records something doesn't mean it approves of it." We don't have that option with the book of Joshua. It is the record of how the people of Israel took over the land of the Canaanites in a military campaign which involved them killing many people. And in our reading today, Joshua 5:13 – 6:5, God makes it clear that this was His plan, achieved by His power. It would be weird for Christians, and those living in a culture with deeply Christian foundations, to read this and not have some kind of struggle with it.

God is good, all the time. When we find things in the Bible that seems to suggest otherwise to us, we need to read and think carefully and prayerfully. Have we misunderstood what we've read? Or have we

misunderstood what goodness is, and applied our own incorrect standards to God? I think in the case of the book of Joshua, both those options are in play. But I'm not going to say that the warfare we read of in this book didn't take place, nor that it had nothing to do with God.

Let's get some clarity by starting with the background to this story. 400 years before our reading, the one true God, YHWH, had interrupted the life of Abraham and Sarah, an elderly childless couple who didn't know who He was, and made incredible promises (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham's descendants were to worship and serve YHWH in the land He would give them, so that all the nations could see His goodness and greatness. God explained that this wasn't going to happen for 400 years, at which time the sinful behaviour of the people living in the land would be at its absolute worst (Genesis 15:13-14, 16). We get glimpses of what they were like in the Old Testament, which agrees with what ancient non-biblical texts suggest (Leviticus 18:1-28, Deuteronomy 18:9-12, Judges 4:2-3, 1 Kings 24:26, Ezekiel 16:29). God is too good to be OK with this; there is a time when He says, "Enough!"

Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*: "Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love."

He hated the wicked things that the Canaanites were doing to themselves and others, and this was to be the moment when He acted to stop them. In fact, the more we think about this, the more we might start to think that God should have acted earlier! We often do this, don't we? Doubting the fairness of His judgements when He acts, and when He doesn't! We all want the world to put to rights. Judgement is when God does this. And because He is just, He is going to do this to every single person who has ever lived.

This means the conquest cannot be seen as ethnic cleansing, as is sometimes said. The Canaanites were not judged because of their ethnicity but because of their iniquity; there is no sense of racial superiority because Israel is explicitly told not to get any idea that they are superior. God didn't choose them because of any merit they had! The judgement in conquest happens because of how awful the Canaanites have become (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). Those members of Israel who commit sins like them are punished like them (Joshua 7). Eventually, the whole nation of Israel is expelled because of this (2 Kings 24:25, NB 2 Kings 25:5 returns the armies of Israel to where they began the conquest 1,000 years earlier). The people who were given the land were not all ethnic Israelites either. They are described as a "mixed multitude" because some Egyptians saw what Israel's God had done there and chose to follow Him rather than their defeated gods (Exodus 12:38). See Ruth as a later example of radical inclusion. The few Canaanites who do turn to YHWH for mercy, Rahab, and the Gibeonites, find mercy (Joshua 2, 6, 9).

So what actually happens in the conquest, which seems so full of death and destruction when we read it? God tells Moses what is going to happen, in Exodus 23:27-30. The phrase "drive out" is used throughout the conquest narrative. There is destruction, God's judgement comes on some of the Canaanites in their death. But the purpose of the campaign from Israel's point of view is eviction. The narrative focuses on certain cities being attacked, the first of which is Jericho. But these they really aren't what we think of when we use the word city. They were military fortifications, inhabited mostly by soldiers and officials. It would be like the castle complex in Edinburgh, not the residential areas. They weren't very big: Jericho could be marched around seven times in one day (Joshua 6:4), and there still be time for a battle afterwards. Some estimates put the population of Jericho as low as 100. Most people lived outside the city walls. And because they knew that those forts would be the focus of any fighting, they tended flee elsewhere when an army approached.

Of course the language used in Joshua doesn't necessarily suggest this (Joshua 10:20a, 11:23) but this is war rhetoric, black and white, bold and confident. Like poetry, it tells the truth without necessarily being

factually accurate. We know that this is how it was meant to be heard, because alongside the triumphant statements, sometimes right next to them, are descriptions of reality (Joshua 10:20, the whole verse, 13:1). This is what we would expect, given that God had said that He would drive the Canaanites out little by little.

There was a strict boundary to the land Israel was to take. They were not to be warmongers or empire-builders like other nations (Deuteronomy 2:4, 9, 19). No-one else would ever be able to claim God’s instruction for this kind of event (e.g. Ephesians 6:12, 2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

There was violence in God’s judgement being brought to pass. There is never a happy ending for those who oppose God, whether it comes to them in this life or the one to come (Matthew 13:42). Jesus and the New Testament writers are just as emphatic about this (Matthew 13:41-42, Revelation 19:11-21). But judgement need not be the end of the story, as we will see later on...

Part 2: The battle belongs to the Lord

Joshua looks up and sees a man who declares himself to be “the commander of the army of the Lord” (Joshua 5:14). “Are you for us or for our enemies?” Joshua had asked. “No” is the answer. You need to get on my side, is the implication. Joshua does this immediately, by worshipping Him and asking for instructions. Presumably, Joshua is expecting to be told how to attack Jericho. But instead he is told to take his sandals off because he is on holy ground. Next, he is given a promise that Jericho will be given into this hand, despite how secure it seems to be (6:1, 2). And then he is given a battle plan that makes no earthly sense.

This encounter would have reminded Joshua of what had happened to his predecessor, Moses. He too had an unexpected meeting with God which required him to remove his sandals because the place he was standing on was holy ground (Exodus 3:5-10). Maybe it reminded Joshua that Moses had also been given a plan to carry out that made no earthly sense (Exodus 3:10). And God had done it.

There’s someone else we’re meant to think of here:

Joshua	Abraham
Travels the length of the Promised Land so that YHWH may be worshipped	Travels the length of the Promised Land worshipping YHWH
“He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him...” (Joshua 5:13)	“He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.” (Genesis 18:2)
“And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, ‘What does my lord say to his servant?’” (Joshua 5:14)	“He ... bowed himself to the earth and said, ‘O Lord ... [I am] your servant.’” (Genesis 18:2-3)
City of Jericho faces destruction for its sins (Joshua 6:2)	City of Sodom faces destruction for its sins (Genesis 18:16-23)
Rahab and family escape, thanks to two men (Joshua 6:22-25)	Lot and family escape, thanks to two men (Genesis 19:16)

What is this parallel meant to show us? 1. That God keeps His promises. He told Abraham that his descendants would grow to be a nation and be given this land, and that is now happening. 2. That God is “the Judge of all the earth [who will] do what is just”, as Abraham said (Genesis 18:25). He would have spared Sodom from destruction if just ten righteous people had been found there (Genesis 18:32). He did mercifully rescue Lot and his family (Genesis 19:16). 3. That God’s choosing of Abraham and Sarah, an elderly couple who couldn’t have children, to fill this land was another plan that made no earthly sense

(Genesis 17:7-14). So, in three different ways, directly and through the parallels with Abraham and Moses, Joshua is told this battle belongs to the Lord (1 Samuel 17:47, Zechariah 4:6). Any success Joshua has will only be because of his obedience to Almighty God. The same is true for God's people today.

There is, of course, one more association we're meant to make with Joshua. Jesus, like Joshua, passed through the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13). He entered the Promised Land on a mission of conquest. Joshua began his campaign with a blast of trumpets (Joshua 6:4). Trumpets were later used by Israel to herald the year of Jubilee throughout the land (Leviticus 25:9-10). This was a moment of liberation from slavery, cancellation of debt, and restoration for all God's people. When Jesus begins his campaign, He reads from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19).

So begins the ultimate liberation. Because Jesus surpasses Joshua. Joshua was a soldier, Jesus is the Saviour. He defeated evil wherever He went. Not with a sword but by speaking grace and truth. By healing the sick and casting out demons. By meeting pride with humility, selfishness with service, hypocrisy with true faith. And by dying for His enemies. Jesus put Himself in the place of punishment, taking God's judgement for many on the cross. God's righteous anger at the sins of millions and billions was poured out on Him to the very last drop, so that God's love and mercy could be poured out on all who believe in Him (Romans 5:6-10). (This is, by the way, the reason anyone here would be troubled by the violence in Joshua's conquest: the teachings and acts of Jesus have so radically impacted our culture.)

Joshua died and was buried (Joshua 24:29-30). Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. He is the commander of the armies of the Lord, with all authority in heaven and on earth. And, as His disciples beheld Him unexpectedly and worshipped Him, like Joshua did, He gave them His command (Matthew 28:19-20). Go with the sword of my word, in baptism they will die to their old ways and be raised to new life, and fill the whole earth.

Response

Before we finish by looking at Jesus's mission for His people, I need to bring your attention to His message to you if you haven't put your faith in Him. I've said already that it is OK to explore difficult passages and experiences in order to come to an understanding of God's goodness. We can do that in a way that does not hold God in judgement but seeks to trust and love Him more. But there is a way in which people do judge God. "Are You for me, or against me?", they ask. Will you conform to my preferences and expectations, and do what I want you to, or not? If you ask a question like that, His answer will be "No.". But if you bow before Him, and ask Him if He will save you and lead you, He will surely answer "Yes" with all His loving heart. This is the challenge and the hope that Jesus offers every person on earth, to you today: Get on My side. He alone can offer you true liberty. Freedom from the sin that distorts and destroys you and those around you. Freedom from the idols that control you. Freedom from judgement and death. He alone can conquer and drive out those things. Today, you can bow down before Him, worship Him as Your Lord and Your God. Will you do that? He can be your Saviour, you do not want Him as your enemy.

For those of us who have done this already, we are recruited to follow Him in proclaiming His good news.

1. We must honour Him, like Joshua did. We worship Him, as our recent "People of Praise" series reminded us. The battle belongs to the Lord, so we must fight His way (2 Corinthians 10:4). Trusting Him that prayer and holiness, love and service, are the ways He will use. We present Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word, even when that clashes with the cultures we live in (2 Corinthians 4:2).

2. Obey Him. Joshua was to do what He was told and see God act, so are we. We're responsible for obedience, He is responsible for success. It's His strength at work in us, not ours (2 Corinthians 4:7). Not

everyone will accept the good news when we offer it to them. That isn't necessarily because we did a poor job. Most people didn't accept Jesus, and we're all pretty confident that no-one could have done it better than He did! The terrifying reality of judgement is as present in the New Testament as in the Old (Luke 10:10-12, see also 2 Corinthians 4:4). People won't always believe the gospel, but they have to hear it in order to believe (Romans 10:15). That's the part we're responsible for. So let's continue to share about Him whenever we can, however we can. We are certain that this includes planting more churches so that more people can hear of and experience the love of God in Christ.

3. Believe Him. For some of you today, that battle for faith is to trust and delight in God's goodness. But we are meant to go beyond this, to get alongside our commander and believe what He says He is going to do. David Ogilvie: "Sometimes, all we can see are mighty walls and closed gates. But the God who brought Jericho down is able to bring them down." Whether it happens in a week, like Jericho. Or over years, like the rest of the conquest. Or centuries, like the great commission. God will do what He has promised. As individuals and as a church, let's keep trusting Him. Let's ask in prayer again. Act in faith again. Maybe today is the day of breakthrough. "I am the commander of the army of the LORD," declares Jesus, "Now I have come."