

# Joshua 5.13 – 6.27

## The Walls come Tumbling Down

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The old Negro spiritual was wrong. Joshua didn't fight the battle of Jericho, but the walls did come tumbling down. Joshua was not the commander for the attack on the city of Jericho and its total destruction. As he was contemplating the tactics he would need to carry out the task Joshua encounters an armed man who removes his command. It was God who fought the battle of Jericho and he caused the walls to come tumbling down.

### **1. God commanded the total destruction of Jericho and its people**

Joshua, like Moses before him, stands in the presence of God to receive instructions for the task ahead of him. Joshua like Moses is told to take off his shoes for the Commander of the army of the Lord has come and the ground is made holy by his presence. And our text has the word for Lord in capital letters, which makes it very clear that this is YHWH the covenant God of Israel, leading the attack. Some would go further and say that wherever God appears in human form in the OT it is actually the second person of the Trinity who would become permanently human in the person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Maybe many of us have already become uncomfortable with the Book of Joshua knowing that it is about the total destruction of the Canaanites by the advancing Israelites – although you may be relieved to know that not all Canaanites were destroyed and their DNA is still alive and well in modern Lebanon according to recent media reports. You may have thought that you could deal with all the unpleasantness of the slaughter by saying that this is the action of a primitive people who did not understand that God loves all

people and they must have mistaken his purposes. The text does not let us do that, It puts God right in the centre of the operation. The reformer Calvin understood this and it is the core of his response the question that we might refer to as the Canaanite genocide. He writes:

*The indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter, making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God. But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had justly doomed those nations to destruction, this puts an end to all discussion<sup>1</sup>.*

So Calvin says that since it is God who is in command we should not question what is commanded. Questioning the command of God is what got us into this mess in the first place! The Serpent's first words of temptation were, 'Did God say...?' But modern minds are prone to questioning and we want to ask why God commanded this destruction.

(This is the point when the preacher says: this is a big subject and I haven't got time to deal with it now! But I will continue ...)

We are into the whole question of what is to be done about evil in the world, which is typified by the Canaanites. We shouldn't start from the point of view that sees them as cuddly innocent people destroyed by the nasty vindictive Israelites. Canaan was polluted by idolatry and the worst excesses of evil. Abraham was told that God was allowing them over 400 years before judgement for their sins fell on them, but during that time we would only see an increase in evil<sup>2</sup>. The destruction of the Canaanites is the removal of evil from the land that God had promised to the Israelites. Abraham's great challenge to God when he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah 'Shall

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on 6.20

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 15.16

not the judge of all the earth do what is just?<sup>3</sup> rings in our ears. We believe in a God of justice. We know that he will judge all humankind at the end of time. We believe in a righteous and just God. There is eternal judgement, but sometimes judgement on sin is carried out in history. That is what is happening here. We cannot say that God likes to carry out his judgements, but sometimes such drastic action is necessary to prevent even great evil and harm to many people.

What God does here is not a mandate for any human directed genocide today. It is an action of God, which we may not fully understand, taking place at a particular point in salvation history – which is not the point at which we stand today. And we must look at this whole incident through the prism of the cross of Jesus. How does God finally deal with evil? He received it into his own person on the cross and by his death and resurrection defeats sin forever.

Israel is to restore Canaan to become like Eden and for the people to become a holy nation revealing the true God to the world and becoming a blessing to the nations. But they are also human people who have not escaped the corrupting power of sin in their own lives. When God revealed himself in power at Sinai they swiftly turned to the idolatry of the Golden Calf. The removal of the Canaanites was intended to protect the Israelites from their influences so that they would not descend into the same idolatry and evil. But the Canaanites were not totally destroyed and the Israelites did fall into similar sins so that at the end they were sent out of the land into exile.

But our story shows one of the best generations of Israelites, who obey God's strange command to keep walking around the city day by day until God gives them the victory. An obedient people is what God desires whatever he may command.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 18.25

## **2. A promise kept and grace revealed**

Before I come to my final section on the lessons that we might learn from this passage, I want to turn from the destruction to the wonderful act of mercy and grace. Amongst all the Canaanites there was one woman who was saved together with all her family. You looked at the story two weeks ago, but it occurs here again that we might not dwell on the destruction, but on God's remarkable mercy. In the instructions for the destruction of Jericho and all the chaos that would ensue, Joshua is very concerned that the promise that had been given to Rahab by the spies might be kept. We serve a promise-keeping God and must be a promise-keeping people. They are sent off to bring her out of the doomed city. She is kept separate from the people initially, but then becomes a mother in Israel in fact the mother of Boaz, who plays a vital role in the other story of the grace of God to non-Israelites, which is told in the Book of Ruth. And from the line of Rahab (more Canaanite DNA!) comes King David and she appears in genealogy of Jesus himself<sup>4</sup>. Was she the outstandingly moral person in Jericho who deserved to be saved from the destruction of the city as Lot was rescued from Sodom? No she was Canaanite prostitute, but she had come to believe in the God of Israel. She saw his power and asked for protection. She discovered his grace and her life was transformed. She is a sinner saved by the grace of God.

### **3. What lessons should we draw from this passage?**

First that sin and evil have to be dealt with. Sin needs to be eradicated if we are to live in fellowship with the living God and fulfil his creation purpose of a people who love him and do not reject him to serve idols. If we have not come to believe that in Jesus God has taken all our sin and the evil of the world into his own person that it might be destroyed by his death and resurrection, then we will not escape a judgement much worse than

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1. 5

anything meted out on the Canaanites. Like Rahab we have to identify ourselves with the God of Israel and find safety and a new life in him.

We, like the Israelites, are called to be a holy people serving God in our generation and we need to have a destructive attitude to the sin in our lives that would stop us fulfilling that vocation. Our Canaanites are not the evil people still to be found in this world, but sins that cling to us and spoil our lives. Idols need to be rooted out.

But finally, I believe this passage calls us to a renewed belief in our God and a trusting of him and his word. Calvin was right. We may find it hard to understand the destruction of the Canaanites. We may wish that we only had to rejoice in the walls of Jericho falling down by the power of God and not face the consequences for the Canaanites. We may want to dwell on God's mercy to Rahab, but ultimately, like Rahab, we are called to believe in a God whose ways are not our ways<sup>5</sup>, whose wisdom is past finding out<sup>6</sup>, but who calls us to trust and obey him just as Joshua and the Israelites did here. We are called to look at God and our own life through cross of Christ where sin and evil were defeated and we were given entry into our promised land – a new heaven and a new earth where there is only righteousness.

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 55.8-9

<sup>6</sup> Romans 11.33