

“Holy War”
Deuteronomy 7:1-11
June 27, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We’re in our eighth of thirteen sermons in our series surveying the Old Testament. We’re looking today at the conquest of the land, and find ourselves face to face with a passage many outside the church, and even some inside the church, will find highly objectionable. It’s a passage where God commands the extermination of several Canaanite tribes living in the land God promised to the descendents of Abraham. God promises Israel that he will see to the defeat of Israel’s enemies, though they are stronger militarily than Israel. **“And when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction”** (v. 2). It becomes clear later that complete destruction meant the death of every man, woman and child, and the burning of all their property. It was as if the face of the earth should be wiped clean of their very existence. Several have pointed out how surprising this seems in light of God’s promise to Abraham to make him a blessing to all the nations. Why were the Canaanites an exception to this?

Not surprisingly, many voices have been raised to condemn the holy war command given in this passage and others in the Old Testament. The so-called “new atheists” see in the holy war evidence for their central claim that religious belief is harmful to society. Others are not quite so ready to cast off all religion, but do find here a reason to abandon Christianity. There are those who wish to maintain their Christianity, but redefine it in such a way that passages like this one, or any other that may be found objectionable, can be thrown out. What is left, of course, is a bland Christianity that will no longer have the ability to challenge us in any way.

Is there a way we can understand this passage that honors the text while also maintaining its unity with the teachings of Christ? Is the practice of holy war applicable to us today, and if so, in what way? How do we apply passages such as this? Let’s explore these questions by considering the following three points.

I. Holy War Clarification

It will be helpful to begin with some clarification about what is actually being taught here. First, due to the notorious wickedness of the Canaanites, this action was not unjust. Five hundred years before this, God had told Abraham that his descendents would not inherit this land for four generations. It would take that long, God said, **“for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet**

complete” (Gen. 15:16). In time, they would descend into further evil until becoming fully ripe for this kind of judgment. Some archaeological discoveries have highlighted the violence and evil of the Canaanites. One discovery was a poem of Canaanite mythology, describing the goddess Anath, wife of Baal, who loved war and violence. The poem describes one of her adventures.

Deciding on a massacre, she smote and slew from seacoast (west) to sunrise. Filling her temple with men she barred the doors and hurled at them chairs, tables and footstools. Soon she waded in blood up to her knees—nay, up to her neck. ‘Her liver swelled with laughter; her heart was full of joy.’ She then washed her hands in gore and proceeded to other occupations.

In order for God’s creation not to descend into total chaos, it is required that he step in from time to time with the kind of judgment that will arrest this descent. From the biblical perspective, the surprising fact is not that he brings such judgment, but that he refrains from bringing it more frequently than he does.

A second clarification is that this holy war practice requiring the complete destruction of Israel’s enemies was not a universal requirement. It seems that only Canaanite enemies living in the land God had determined to give to Israel were singled out for this extreme treatment. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, laws were given for the treatment of the rest of Israel’s enemies, and they were considerably different than the warfare practices of our passage. For example, the entire chapter of Deuteronomy 20 is taken up with rules for warfare, and it is a different type of warfare. **“When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you”** (Dt. 20:10-11). It goes on to say that if a battle becomes necessary, then only the males are to be killed. The difference was that these were the enemies outside the land God was giving to Israel, not the Canaanites who lived in that land. Why the difference?

There was something about the land that led to this requirement. God had determined that this was to be holy land, holy because he had decided to take up residence upon it when the tabernacle was located there. Though the Canaanites were a particularly unholy people, the more significant factor leading to this holy war command was the holiness of the land. This can be seen in an interesting passage in Leviticus 18, a passage dealing mostly with sexual relations. At the end of the chapter, a reason is given that relates to our passage. **“For the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean”** (v. 27). The next verse in Leviticus then says that if Israel engages in similar behavior, the land will **“vomit you out.”** That’s exactly what will happen several centuries later when Israel is exiled to Assyria and later Babylon.

II. Holy War Interpretation

An understanding of any event must take into consideration its context. The same action can look very different depending upon its context. Imagine, for example, that someone is being confined to their room. The door is locked from the outside, and the person inside is being confined against their will. If the context is a kidnapping, the act is evil. But if the context is the lawful incarceration of a kidnapper following a fair trial and the imposition of a just sentence, then this same act is seen not as evil but as good and necessary.

So we must interpret this practice of the holy war in its context. It is striking that the immediate context of our passage is one of the strongest statements in Deuteronomy about the love of God. **“The Lord your God has chosen you...because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers”** (7:6, 8). Christopher Wright says that “when we arrive at the ‘heart’ of the chapter, we find it beating with the passionate love of God... divine love and grace stand at the core of a chapter commanding total destruction!” (p. 108). To interpret the holy war properly, then, we must see it in light of the love of God.

There are two things to be said about the holy war that place it in its proper context of God’s love. First, it should be seen as a warning about the inevitable judgment of God when sinful people draw near to a holy God. Remember that it was the fact that God designated this small stretch of land as the land of his holy presence that led to this holy war. One day the entire earth will be the dwelling place of God. Revelation 21 speaks of the new earth and says, **“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people”** (21:3). The word for dwelling place there is the word “tabernacle.” It was God’s locating the tabernacle in Canaan that made it a holy land requiring this complete judgment, and it will be God’s expansion of that holy land to the whole earth that will lead to the ultimate holy war of the great judgment. The holy war of our passage is a warning of that future holy war. It is an act of God’s mercy to give warning of this.

We need to pause for an application here. A warning is to be heeded, and we need to heed this warning from God. Our sins make us deserving of God’s action of wiping the earth clean of us. I realize that people don’t like this kind of talk, but no amount of dislike of it will change it. I have read that there were warnings given prior to the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig. But since the warnings would have required some costly steps to address, they were ignored. After all, they could have consoled themselves with the thought that no ecological catastrophe had ever resulted from any accidents throughout decades of drilling. I’m sure the oil company executives are wishing now that they had heeded these warnings. No matter how costly it might have been to do so, it would have been a fraction of the cost they have already paid or will soon

pay. But, of course, it's too late, isn't it? We need to heed the warning of the holy war. God's judgment is real, and it is complete and impartial. There's a story of one of the Canaanites doing precisely this, showing us what we need to do. Her name is Rahab, and she was a prostitute living in the first Canaanite city that was the victim of the holy war—Jericho. When some Israelite spies came to her, she told them how the Lord's reputation had spread to Jericho, creating fear among the inhabitants. She heeded the warning of the coming destruction and secured from the spies a promise of her deliverance when it came. She was protected by a promise.

This brings us to the second part of the context of the holy war. God has given us a promise of deliverance from this judgment by making Jesus the victim of the holy war in our place. When the holy war was completed, there was no indication left that a people had been there. The annihilation was complete, resulting in the loss not only of all the lives of its victims, but also all their property. Jesus' life ended similarly. Not only was his life lost through the cruelty of death by crucifixion, but all his property was forfeit. The soldiers cast lots to see who would become the new owner of his garments. He lost his friends, as they all abandoned him in the hour of his need. His God left him, too, leading him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the cross, God is not only the subject of the holy war. He is its object as well. We see in this how far God is willing to go to love a people of his own and restore to us the new paradise the earth will come when God moves in fully.

III. Holy War Application

How do we apply this whole area of the holy war to ourselves? It is important to note first that we don't apply it directly. Some fear that this teaching will be used today as an argument for seeking to establish Christianity by the power of the sword. But it is clear from the New Testament that the church has been denied the power of the sword. Peter tried to begin a new holy war when the soldiers approached Jesus to arrest him. He was thwarted by his poor aim and, more importantly, by Jesus himself, who commanded him to put away his sword and then healed the man's ear Peter had lopped off while aiming for the middle of the head. Jesus' command to put away the sword was not just for Peter, but for the whole church. We fight now with only two weapons—prayer and the gospel, brought to people through loving words and through loving deeds. As the hymn says, "For not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes."

A second application is to engage in holy war in the manner spoken of in the New Testament. The reason given for the holy war in Deuteronomy 7 is stated in verse 6. **"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God."** To be holy means to be separate. In the context of Deuteronomy, it means to keep the

first commandment. Commentators have noticed how the early chapters of Deuteronomy are in the form of an application of the first commandment, and we can see that in this verse. We are called to maintain our difference as God's people. To be separate doesn't mean to be weird; it means to be distinctive because of our ultimate allegiance to God. As Peter says in his first epistle, **"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'"** (1:14-16). Is there some area in your life right now where you need to fight for personal holiness?

A third application is to proclaim the gospel without omitting the warning of God's judgment. The holy war speaks of the judgment deserved by all who violate the first commandment, the one that says we are to have no gods before the one true God. All who give ultimate allegiance to another God ought to have the earth wiped clean of their presence. They don't want to live in a world ruled by its creator, so God's judgment makes it so. They are removed from the world created and ruled by God. This is the heart of our sin, too, and it deserves nothing less than this judgment. Gospel proclamation that speaks only of the love of God has been severed from its biblical context of the judgment deserved by all sin. The result is the irrelevance of the gospel. Robby Plemmons stopped by the church office this week, and we were discussing the challenges of his church planting work in Utah. He commented that the average unchurched person in Utah is completely disinterested in attending church. They find it inconceivable that anyone would want to give up a few hours on a Sunday to go to church when there are so many recreational alternatives that provide a more satisfying experience. When we were at the World Harvest retreat a few weeks ago, the missionaries in Europe reported of the same widespread apathy among the unchurched they encountered. Such apathy, I believe, is caused by the loss of the reality of God's judgment. The church has tried to speak of the love of God apart from the context of God's judgment. That's like trying to sell snow blowers in Florida. The judgment of God must become real to us, and it must be included in our talk about the Lord.

CONCLUSION:

As we come to the Lord's Table today, let us be reminded that it is the Lord who fights for us against all our enemies. The three enemies we all have are the world and its animosity toward God, our own sinful natures that are still so strong inside of us, and the devil who accuses us and tempts us to believe that God is bad. All three of these enemies are too strong for us, just like the Canaanites were too strong for Israel. But God has fought for us and won. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, all our enemies have been put to flight. Our greatest need is to trust him and follow him.