

[Joshua 24:1-28](#)

We spent a long time going through some of the highlights of Genesis and Exodus. Now, in a matter of just two or three weeks, the Lectionary has skipped to the end of Joshua. Last week it was chapter 3: this week, we're in the final chapter.

Why?

These days, Joshua is a contentious and contested book. In Israel, it is compulsory reading for schoolchildren as a way of inculcating the right to the land over and above the Palestinians.

Others look at it and say that in today's terms, it's a story of ethnic cleansing.

So while I can't go into extensive detail in a talk like this, I do at the outset just want to share four reasons why we shouldn't see the book of Joshua as an account of ethnic cleansing.

Firstly, the biblical evidence shows that the Canaanite tribes were guilty of terrible evil, not least child sacrifice, and for this reason they fully merited the judgment of God.

Secondly, when we read about cities in the Old Testament, we need to understand them very differently from the New Testament and from our culture today. Generally speaking, they were more military fortresses than general major centres of population. So when Israel conquers a city, it usually means they defeated a military base.

Thirdly, when we read all the horrendous language of everyone and everything being slaughtered, a scholar named Paul Copan¹ has showed that this is what we would call 'hyperbolic language'. It's one of those times when things are expressed in an extreme way to make a point.

For example, a few weeks ago I could have said that my beloved Tottenham Hotspur massacred Manchester United 6-1. Were there bodies of Manchester United players strewn across the pitch at Old Trafford? No. People would have simply understood me to be talking about a comprehensive victory in a one-sided match.

Fourthly, the accounts of the battles often talk about the 'devoted things' and footnotes in Bibles tend to say that these are people or items that were to be devoted to the Lord, usually by destruction. This sounds rather chilling when

applied to human beings or animals. However, that understanding of ‘devoted things’ is now being challenged by scholars such as John H Walton², who are saying it by no means refers to killing living beings or destroying objects.

Having said all that, let us spend a few minutes specifically on today’s passage. The Lectionary gives us only selected verses from this incident, but it made more sense to me to read the entire episode.

Joshua rather sounds like a barrister giving his closing speech to the jury at the end of a long court case, but the verdict he want from not twelve men good and true, but twelve tribes, is that of renewing their covenant with God.

How does Joshua make his case? He gives them a **history lesson**. It’s their own history – the history of the People of God.

Or more precisely, it’s the history of God’s dealings with them. If you’ve ever heard the old saying that ‘History is His Story’, then this is what Joshua tells them. If we look at our past, he says to Israel, we see it’s the story of God’s work among us.

He begins with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (verses 2-4). Here, he emphasises the call of God. That’s what it’s all about, says Joshua: God began all this by calling Abraham and his descendants. It’s not that there was anything special or superior about us: this is about the grace of God in choosing and calling us.

Always remember that, he seems to say. None of this is our doing. It’s not that we have extra talents or moral character. It always starts with God – just as centuries later John Wesley was to believe in prevenient grace, God’s grace coming first. Self-righteousness has no place in a relationship with God. It’s all about grace.

Next, Joshua goes on to Egypt, and God’s deliverance of his people from evil and injustice there (verses 5-7). When we were afflicted as slaves, God acted. When we were helpless, trapped at the Red Sea, God delivered.

Look at this God, says Joshua. This is what he has done for us.

We too might look back over our past and consider all that God has done for us.

After this, in this edited history, Joshua takes his people to when they were east of the Jordan, where God conquered the Amorites who fought against

them, and he also delivered them from the curses that Balak king of Moab called Balaam to place on the Israelites (verses 8-10). It's not the army of Israel that defeats the Amorites, it's God. And it's God who also defeats the spiritual attack of the curses.

So Joshua effectively says to Israel, look again at our God. He is superior to our enemies.

It's rather like the words of John in his First Epistle: 'Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.' Whatever we have to contend with, God is mightier.

Then Joshua brings it up to date, west of the Jordan, where not only have various Canaanite tribes been defeated, but God has also given a rich and fertile land (verses 11-13). And again, it's all God's doing:

'You did not do it with your own sword and bow ... land on which you did not toil ... cities which you did not build ... vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.' (Verses 12-13)

Our inheritance is entirely down to the work of God, Joshua tells the people. As with everything Joshua says, everything is down to unearned grace, mercy, and salvation.

So it seems that Joshua QC has made his case to the jury. What is your verdict, he asks? I know my verdict, he says: 'as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.' (verses 14-15)

Sure enough, the jury delivers its verdict:

¹⁶ Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! ¹⁷ It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled. ¹⁸ And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.'

Great! Job done, Joshua! You got the verdict you wanted.

Er, no.

There's something not quite right in Israel's verdict. Joshua's job is not done. As well as giving Israel a **his-story lesson**, he now has to give them a **discipleship lesson**, if I may use a term that is more New Testament than Old Testament.

Because effectively Joshua goes on to say, it's all very well saying that you're glad God has answered your prayers and blessed you and you're promising to show up for worship, but that's not enough (verses 19-20). If he were speaking to us he would be saying, there is so much more to this covenant between God and his people than God giving us his blessings and forgiveness and us turning up to Sunday service (lockdowns notwithstanding, of course).

What Joshua tells the people is that thankfulness for God's blessings isn't enough. We show our thankfulness not simply by gathering for worship and putting something in the offertory. No: we show our thankfulness for those blessings by seeking to obey our God.

For Christians, that means following Jesus. It means taking his teaching seriously. It means being a seven-days-a-week follower, not just Sundays.

And when Joshua tells Israel not to 'forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods' (verse 20), we hear Jesus telling us not to love anything or anyone more than him. Not our families, not our jobs, not our standard of living, not our leisure activities. Putting any of that above serving Jesus is idolatry.

As Israel had to recognise what God had done for them in the Exodus and the Conquest, so Christians need to recognise what Jesus has done for us in the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension.

This makes me think about two friends of mine. They became Christians in adult life. One day, the wife said to the husband those potentially ominous words, 'There's something I need to tell you.'

She went on: 'I love Jesus more than I love you.'

How would her husband react? He smiled and embraced her.

He knew that if they loved Jesus more than all, everything else would fall into place. If they strived after other things first, they would always fail.

When we think about all that Jesus has done for us, can we say something similar? Jesus, I love you more than my spouse. I love you more than my

children (and grandchildren). I love you more than my job. More than my house. More than my savings. I love you more than my friends.

When we can say that, we are in a covenant with God. We have delivered the right verdict.

Two Prayers for Remembrance Sunday

Saviour God, as we,
the communion of the living,
salute the communion of the dead,
heal the ancient wound that festers in humanity's heart.
Release compassion in places
where much blood has been shed.
Heal those
who can barely live with memories of injury or loss.
Salvage hope from the wrecks of time.³

Christ, linking us across the shores of treachery and time,
we give you thanks:
for the heroism of those who served in armed services
or on the home front
to provide relief, medical care or supplies;
for the patient suffering of the inhabitants
through the time of scarring;
for the dedication of those
who kept alight the torch of freedom
and sustained hope in others
for the reconstruction of communities
and the reconciliation of peoples
of different nationality and creed
following the years of destruction.
We pray for commitment to the unending struggle
against selfish ways and violation of human dignity.
We pray for that peace
which is the full blossoming of our life together.⁴

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Your presence be our shield.
The love of God to enfold us,
the peace of God to still us,
the Spirit of God to fill us,
the saints of God to inspire us,
the angels of God to guard us
this day, this night, this winter, for ever.⁵

¹ Paul Copan, *Is God A Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Baker, 2011)

² John H Walton and J Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites* (IVP Academic, 2017)

³ Ray Simpson, *His Complete Celtic Prayers* (Augsburg Books, 2011), #191

⁴ *Ibid.*, #192

⁵ *Ibid.*, #203 (edited)