

"We Utterly Destroyed"

Holy war. That's a scary subject today, with Muslim terrorists in the name of *jihad*, their concept of holy war, going around killing civilians in things like 9/11 and suicide bombings. And this was a scary thing in the past, when Crusaders in the name of Christianity went to war over the so-called holy lands, killing people, sadly, in the name of Christ. Those are just a couple of examples of the many atrocities that have been committed under the guise of holy war.

Well, what about this passage? In this passage, Israel begins their military conquest of the Promised Land. The Hebrew word for this sort of conquest is the word *cherem*. *Cherem* warfare. It's when they utterly destroyed man, woman, and child, in the name of God. It's basically the biblical word for a sort of holy war. I hope this causes you to sit up straight in your seats when you hear this. So the question becomes, is this an atrocity, akin to what Muslim terrorists do today, and what the Crusaders did in the past? If you do think so, and you're a Christian, do you just try to ignore passages like this? Or, if they are not the same sort of thing, then why? What's the difference?

Well, I do believe there is quite a difference between what we see here with Israel and these other atrocities committed in the name of holy war. And so that's what I'd like us to be considering today. If we are going to condemn Muslim terrorists who act on their own convictions of holy war, or the Crusades in the past, versus what we see here today with Israel, we need to understand what's going on here. We need to understand biblically what makes Israel's actions here so right, and these other claims to holy war so wrong. We need to ask why God would not only allow Israel to do this, but actually command them to do it, and facilitate it all.

And part of the reason why we need to look at this, is so that we can understand how to rightly apply a passage like this to us today. I want to say right from the start, very clearly, that in the new covenant there is no biblical justification for entering into some earthly holy war like this. I will make that point toward the end of our sermon today. But I just wanted to say it right away. For the New Testament Christian, this sort of holy war is not justifiable for us anymore according to the Bible's teachings. So, why bother studying a passage like this at all then? Well, we'll get there. I want us to see that this passage does have important application for us, especially in light of the New Testament.

And so here's how we'll tackle this passage for today. First, we'll look at the overall passage. We'll observe the details here about Israel's conquest of these two kings. Basically, we'll try to see what's going on here according to the passage. Then, secondly, we'll ask, what makes this right? What makes this holy war right, or maybe we could say, righteous? Third, we'll apply this to today, making the case why we shouldn't see this as a mandate for holy war today, and consider how we should apply it to us as Christians. So that's the plan.

So let's look first at the details of these two battles here. In our passage for today we find Israel conquering the Transjordan; that's the land just

east of the Jordan River, and just east of what might be considered part of the Promised Land proper. But we see here that God had intended to give this land as well to Israel as part of their inheritance. Well, these two battles had already happened in the past within the context of this book. Chapter 1:4 told us that. This passage is still part of the historical introduction to the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is primarily a book where Moses retells the law to the next generation before the people cross over the Jordan to take hold of the Promised Land. But here in this passage, Moses is reminding the people how they got to this point. That God had already gave them military victory over these two Amorite kings: Sihon and Og. What happens here is the military precursor of what will happen throughout the Promised Land. As God gave them military victory here east of the Jordan, he will do the same now as Joshua leads the people across the Jordan to conquer the heart of the Promised Land.

And so let's begin in verse 26. Moses begins by sending words of peace to King Sihon. Of course, the text tells us that Sihon refused that offer and instead came out to fight against Israel. The text even goes so far as to say that God hardened Sihon's heart here. Now time doesn't really allow us to delve into what it means for God to harden someone's heart. That's really another sermon in itself, but let me say at least that it's not done in such a way that God actively works wickedness and sin in someone; we know that can't be the case from other more clear Scriptures. Rather, this is something more like God restraining his common grace so that Sihon is left to his own sinful nature, such that he acts in the way that he does here. But the passage phrases it in this way, to point out that this is all part of God's plan. God had planned to give these lands to Israel through the obstinacy of man's sin. That doesn't remove man's culpability, but it does show how this war against Sihon, and ultimately against Og, was all under God's plan.

And so Israel utterly destroys them. That's the case with both Sihon, and with Og. Chapter 2 verse 34 and chapter 3 verse 6. They utterly destroyed every man, woman, and child in these cities. The word translated in these two verses for utterly destroying is that Hebrew word *cherem*. And so this is describing *cherem* warfare, the Biblical concept of holy war. We see that idea flushed out more and legislated in Deuteronomy chapter 7 and chapter 20. So we will get a chance to consider it more then too. But realize that this is a very unique word. It literally means to "devote to the ban" or "devote to destruction." The idea is that certain things that might normally be considered spoils of war were under a ban, and the people were instead to utterly destroy them. And so that's what the people did here with the Amorites. They utterly destroyed them. But it is important to note that part of the legislation that comes in the later chapters about *cherem* warfare tells us that this sort of warfare was *not* to be the norm for Israel. It was only to be applied to the nations that were in the Promised Land. They were explicitly told not to apply this to the other surrounding nations.

So this leads us to our second point. What's going on here? What makes this right? What makes this right for Israel to go in to these countries in the Promised Land and totally wipe out everybody, even the women and children? What makes this so right, and things like the actions of Muslim terrorists so wrong?

Well, first, and maybe the simplest answer, is to say that God commanded this. We believe that God commanded Israel to do this. And since we believe God to be a righteous God, one who is fully just, that means that this action

must right, even if we have trouble understanding why. Well, in contrast to Muslims terrorists, or even the Crusaders, we don't believe God commanded them to do what they've done. We believe they were misguided, either believing a lie, or making up one themselves, but at the end of the day, we just don't believe God actually commanded them to do what they've done. They might be acting out of true conviction, or they might not be, but that's different than whether or not God really has told them to do what they've done.

Now all this might sound like scary logic in itself. Who's to say that Israel had real revelation from God and the Muslims haven't? Isn't that a bit presumptuous? Well, let me begin to address that objection with this. If you are going to claim a holy war justification to wipe out hordes of people, there better not be any shadow of a doubt that God commanded you to do something like this. Well, certainly that is the case with Israel. Read over the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. This is a record of how this revelation came to Israel. It was not spoken just to one person in private. This was a multigenerational promise over the course of some 400 years where God repeatedly revealed this plan to numerous people, and verified it through both public and private miracles. I think of the ways that God revealed his plan to each of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. I think of how God had so mightily and miraculously brought the people out of Egypt.

I mean, come on. They saw their sons spared at the Passover through the blood on the doorposts as God had commanded them, while they witnessed the Angel of Death kill all the other firstborn males. They saw the Red Sea parted before their eyes where God spared them but destroyed the Egyptians who followed after them as the waves came crashing down on them. God points out to them how amazing his revelation has been to Israel when he recounts it in Deuteronomy 4:11, "And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice." You know maybe we're jaded because today you could stage something like that with microphones and lights. But this wasn't Disneyland's Fantasia. Think about what all the people had seen. Maybe you might doubt what they saw. But they obviously didn't. God's plan and promise was repeatedly confirmed over generations, and certainly this last generation had seen it as well, in all the miracles and revelation throughout the forty year wilderness wandering. I hope you see how abundantly different of a claim of God's command this is. This wasn't a principle of jihad that supposedly one man named Mohammed received in private and then his followers apply however they deem best. This was a very, very specific plan God had here and he made it abundantly clear to his people. And this *cherem* holy war was very narrowly directed against just one area: the nations inhabiting the Promised Land.

Well, okay, hopefully now you can acknowledge that what fundamentally makes this call for holy war for Israel here in the Old Testament is that we believe God actually commanded this. But then a fair question, and an important question, is "Why?" Why would God command something like this? Maybe for you, it might seem to be an inherent contradiction over what you think the nature of God is all about. Maybe such an action just seems so impossible for you to believe that God could make such a commandment. And so I do think it's helpful to try to understand why God would command such a thing, and in that question, I think we can learn more about the nature of God and our relationship to him.

First, I'd like to remind you of the context here. Not every nation was supposed to be under this ban. God had not commanded every nation to be wiped out by Israel. Actually, quite the opposite. Hopefully you remember last week's passage. The first half of chapter 2 is a list of nations that Israel was not supposed to attack or bother militarily. Chapter 7 identifies the very specific list of seven nations that Israel was supposed to wipe out, which includes these Amorites led by King Sihon and King Og. In other words, God had a very specific reason here for Israel to utterly destroy these seven nations, and did not have that plan for Israel to destroy the other nations. In other words, this was not God instituting some wholesale genocide of every non Jew.

What we see instead is that this is a very focused scalpel of judgment by God, while at the same time an act of God's blessing to Israel. The Israelite conquest is both God's hand of judgment against some wicked nations while at the same time a means of graciously blessing the chosen people of God. I think a very helpful background passage here is Genesis 15. Turn with me there. Genesis 15. This is God promising to father Abraham that God will bring his descendants into the Promised Land. Now at that point, Abraham was already living in the Promised Land. But there was going to be a delay in fulfilling this promise. Abraham's descendants would end up living outside the Promised Land, and would have to later return. Look at verse 13. "Then [God] he said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.'" That was predicting their Egyptian slavery. But then God would bring them back to the Promised Land. So why the delay? Why did God not give them the land right now while Abraham was already living in it? Well, because of verse 16 here. "But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

Do you see what's going on? God's going to give the Promised Land to Israel. He's going to have them go in and conquer the land and the nations that are there. But God doesn't do it in an unjust way. He's waiting until just the right time and then going to bring final judgment on these wicked nations. In our passage in Deuteronomy we see God finally using Abraham's descendants to utterly destroy the Amorites. God didn't have them do that before because their sinfulness hadn't come up to the full measure. There was only a certain amount of sin and rebellion that God would tolerate with the Amorites before he would bring them the judgment they deserved.

At the end of the day, this is what's called intrusion ethics. It's an intrusion of the end times. At the end of history, what will happen? God will come to judge the living and the dead. The standard at that point will be perfect righteousness, apart from Christ. If you don't have the forgiveness and grace that comes through Jesus, then you'll be measured by the standard of your own righteousness. And Scripture reveals what we know to be true - none of us are righteous. And so that means that at the end, if we are without Christ, God will give us eternal death and damnation. What God does through Israel here with the Amorites in our passage is just a foretaste ahead of time of what's in store for all those who are not God's people. The fact that God waited these extra generations with the Amorites was actually an expression of his grace in staying the judgment and giving them an opportunity to repent and look to God to save them. God knew they wouldn't, but how merciful of God to give them that extra time. What happened with Israel destroying the Amorites is but a foreshadowing of what

God will do one day in final judgment on all the wicked. This really isn't anything different than what happened at the Flood, or with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those were all examples of intrusion ethics as well, where God intrudes the final judgment into human history ahead of time in a limited way.

Of course this is a further picture of the end times when you think about what's going on positively. The wicked nations are purged from the Promised Land while simultaneously God is giving the land to his chosen people as a holy inheritance. Judgment and blessing happen at the same time. Well, at the end, that's what will happen. God will judge the world. In judgment, he will do away with all unrighteousness. He will purify the world, and make it holy. Then in the new heavens and the new earth, God will plant his saved people in a holy eternal inheritance. You and I will be there, if we look to Jesus in faith. By finding salvation, not in our own personal holiness - we know that we have rebelled against God in ways much like the Amorites - but by faith in Christ, his holiness and righteousness can be ours. The result of faith is that Christ then begins the purifying work in our life. That's a work that's only begun in this life, but at the end, when he makes the new heavens and new earth, he will complete the new work in us as well. At that point, we will be holy and righteous, and living with God in a world that has been freed from anything that is unholy and unrighteous.

You see, if we are tempted to look down on God's action here in judging the Amorites, it may be because we take sin too lightly. All sin deserves what happened to the Amorites here. What we see so graphically right here in this passage in Deuteronomy is a taste of what should happen to us. God would be right, righteous, to condemn us all to eternal damnation. That's what we all deserve. But in God's great mercy, he worked a wonderful rescue plan to bring salvation to this world in his Son Jesus. He calls to trust in Jesus and be saved.

So what about holy war today? If God had Israel do this back then, should we expect this to happen still today? Well, simply put, no. I already made the case how clear God's plan given to Israel was back then. That was a very specific command to enact this judgment this one time against these nations. God had Israel do that, and never gave them or anyone else another mandate to do it again. God gave the flood as an early taste of the final judgment, but we know he promised not to do that again. In the same way, we see no biblical mandate for such physical holy war anymore. Rather, in the New Testament, we see quite the opposite.

You see, Jesus came into a context where the Jews wanted an earthly holy war. They wanted to go and kill off the Romans who occupied them. But Jesus *repeatedly* resisted the pressure to have him lead such an effort. Jesus instead said that his kingdom was not of this world. He had come to show everyone what the earthly Promised Land in the Old Testament really represented. It was but a picture of a greater heavenly inheritance to come. And Jesus was there to announce the imminent coming of that heavenly kingdom. Consequently, Jesus repeatedly refused to take up physical arms against the Romans. The same was true when they came to arrest him. Peter took up a sword to fight back when they tried to arrest Jesus, but Jesus stopped him. Jesus said that we ought to love our enemies. That we are blessed when we are persecuted.

You see, as Christians, the kingdom we ultimately belong to is one that has a different set of weapons and a different enemy than any of the nations in

this world. We see Paul describe that in Ephesians 6 with the spiritual armor that we are to take up. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

You see, that is what we must take away from this passage. We are still in a holy war. But it's not a physical war. It's a spiritual war. The battle front continues, and we war for people's souls. Satan would have us fail. He'd have us get distracted with the glory of an earthly battle. But as a Christian, our holy war is a spiritual one. We bring the gospel to the nations now, that they might be kept from final judgment. There is no biblical basis for any in the church to take up physical arms in the name of holy war. Just look at the New Testament example. Martyrs like Stephen dying under the hand of persecutors. Paul undergoes countless beatings and punishment in the name of Christ. History tells us that Christians were being fed to lions. But the New Testament never suggests that we take up arms to fight back against persecution. No, we follow our savior's example who told Pilate during his trial, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). And so we willingly suffer along with Jesus in the effort to bring the gospel to the world. And we war against Satan through prayer and the spiritual armaments that Christ gives us to wage this battle.

Now as an aside, this doesn't mean that a Christian has to be a pacifist. I'm saying that the church ought not to start a physical war in the name of holy war. But certainly a civil government might call upon its citizens to take up arms in a just cause. There's a difference between a holy war and a just war. Certainly our going to battle in World War II, for example, could be classified as a just war, though not a holy war.

Saints of God, I hope this passage is a little clearer now after our reflection today. God used Israel to send an important message about the coming final judgment. And yet, God at the same time also used the Israelites here to send a message of God's grace to the rest of the nations. You see, the sin of these Amorites had come to their full measure. God's opportunity for grace had ended for them when they rejected the final offer of peace. But that was not the case yet for these other pagan nations. The very nations that God instructed Israel to not attack. There was still time for salvation for them. Would these other nations see the greatness of the God of Israel and turn toward him? Would they find forgiveness in the Messiah that would come forth through Israel? Would they "kiss the Son", in the words of Psalm 2, referring to how the nations ought to give homage to the Messiah that would rise up in Israel? But my point is that Israel's *cherem* warfare against some nations at the same time reminded the other nations of an opportunity yet to turn to the one true God.

Well, is that not still the case, and even more so, now with the Great Commission?

We do our spiritual warfare in the context of the Great Commission! God has us now bringing the gospel of salvation to the nations. And of course that means in the context of the Great Commission, that Jesus is with us spiritually as he promised. If that is the case, then what victory can Satan have over us? None, of course!

But he will try. Let's gird on that spiritual armor as we evangelize the world. Let's clothe ourselves with the strength of being united to Christ. He is our strength. May we be strong in the Lord!

But be warned. Just because our weapons aren't physical, doesn't mean that the enemy won't employ such against us. We may taste physical affliction. But take heart, my brothers and sisters. Christ will come again in glory! The end will come! That day will be a day of great judgment for many, but a day of even greater blessing for those who belong to Christ. Stand firm in your faith, and look forward to that great day. Amen.

Copyright © 2009 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.

