

## **Warfare**

### *Deuteronomy 7*

Sometimes people ask honest questions about God commanding Israel to conquer the land of Canaan: “How could a loving God command the Israelites to destroy entire populations of people - men, women, children, and sometimes animals? How can you justify the nation of Israel driving people from land that they’ve farmed and cultivated for centuries?” For some people, these questions are something of a stumbling block; you may agonize over these questions. If you are teachable, there are some perspectives that can really help you think about the conquest of Canaan.

Other times people aren’t nearly so generous or teachable in their approach to the conquest of Canaan. They aren’t really interested in hearing what Scripture has to say about God and His purposes. They mainly want to promote a caricature of God in the Old Testament as a bloodthirsty, genocidal, tribal deity who cared only about the Jewish people. Some people blaspheme God in this way.

What I’d like to do this morning is to notice what the Bible emphasizes and affirms about the conquest of Canaan. I want us to see what God says about the people living there and about God’s purposes for giving the Land to the children of Israel. As we follow God’s thinking and God’s heart, I believe that we will gain a helpful perspective on the conquest of the Land. We may find that eventually we’re asking a whole different set of questions, questions that get us much closer to the mind/heart of God. We need to approach God’s Word with humility, allowing it to educate us on the types of questions we should be asking about God and His ways.

**The Context of the Conquest of Canaan.** Genesis states rather matter-of-factly that God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants and that they would possess the land as they conquered its people. Genesis 12 describes how God called Abraham to leave his own country and travel west and south. When they got to Canaan, God appeared to Abraham (Genesis 12:7).

7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

The presupposition here is that God is sovereign over all of creation and therefore has “say” over everything and everyone. Psalm 24:1 affirms that “the earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.” If we accept that God owned every square inch of the earth, including the Land of Canaan, we have to conclude that He had every right to give that Land to the children of Israel.

But wasn’t it unfair of God to take the land away from the Canaanites? Weren’t they innocent people living peacefully in the land when God told the Israelites to wipe them off the map? The answer to those questions is a resounding “no!” No, they were not innocent, peace-loving people. Consider what God told Abraham in Genesis 15. God first assured Abraham that he would one day possess the land of Canaan; this seemed very unlikely because the land was already occupied by numerous strong nations such

as the Amorites. God then tells Abraham that after his descendants were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, He would rescue them and bring them back to the Land. In Genesis 15:16 this rationale is given:

16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

In Abraham's day the Amorites were wicked, but they were not sufficiently wicked to warrant God's judgment. But generations into the future their iniquity would be "complete"; they would be so wicked that God's judgment would be unavoidable. This delay in judgment reflects God's patience with peoples and nations. The descendants of Abraham would spend 400 years in slavery because God was unwilling to judge the Amorites prematurely! God really was (and is) slow to anger.

We don't really know God's metrics for judgment, but when we come to the book of Deuteronomy (400+ years later), the Amorites had become so wicked that God's judgment was fully appropriate. We have a glimpse into their wickedness in Deuteronomy 12:31. (See also Leviticus 20:22-23 and Deuteronomy 9:5.) Speaking of the nations who currently lived in the Land, Moses says:

31 "You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

Chris Wright points out that "The conquest was not human genocide. It was divine judgment." We'll see this in our passage (Deuteronomy 7): Israel was God's instrument of judgment on the Canaanites. This doesn't answer the question, "But what about all the innocent people that got 'caught in the crossfire'?" But it does counter the charge that God was some bloodthirsty deity who took pleasure in wiping out whole nations. We even see that people like Rahab, the prostitute, were spared when they sided with Israel and her God.

A theological presupposition behind all of this is that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). What human beings have earned by their sin is death; death is the paycheck we get for our work of sin. In the old covenant, sometimes people died physically for their sin. This death penalty was often carried out directly by God (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah, the day when 23,000 Israelites died in the wilderness, etc.). Other times the death penalty was carried out by humans as God's instruments (e.g. various old covenant laws requiring death for disobedience, conquering the Land, the Babylonian exile, etc.).

Another theological presupposition behind the conquest of Canaan is that God is a just Judge. Abraham appealed to God as the Judge when he asked, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25) Biblically speaking, God is the creator and owner of everything; God is slow to anger, taking no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked; but God is the judge who deals justly. If we accept these truths about God, we are ready to hear a passage like Deuteronomy 7.

### ***The Command to Conquer the Land*** (Deuteronomy 7:1–11)

Notice in these verses how God promises to give them the Land **as** they go to battle.

1 “When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, 2 and when the Lord your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them.

We see here that God would “bring them into the land,” “clear away many nations” before them, and “deliver them before you.” We read in chapter 1 that God promised to fight on their behalf (Deut. 1:30). At the same time, the children of Israel would “defeat them” and “utterly destroy” them.

The phrase translated “utterly destroy” deserves some attention. This phrase is found numerous times in the historical books of the OT (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles). The Hebrew term is “*herem*.” If an object was designated as *herem*, it was “placed under a ban” - meaning that it was off limits. A city, for example, placed under the ban couldn’t be plundered for personal gain.

At times “utterly destroying” a city apparently did involve killing every man, woman, and child (Deuteronomy 3, Joshua 6:21, Joshua 10, etc.). But there is evidence that this verbiage was sometimes (not always - see 1 Samuel 15) hyperbole (or exaggeration). Here in Deuteronomy 7, for example, after commanding the Israelites to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites, they are told “Do not to marry their wives or let your children marry their children.” It’s assumed that not every person was killed. It’s likely that “utterly destroying” a city was standard rhetorical language used in that day to talk about achieving absolute victory in battle. Actually, the most common language used in Deuteronomy of the conquest of Canaan is that of “driving out” or “dispossessing” the peoples of the Land (see 7:17, 9:1, etc.).

It’s important to note that the rules of warfare changed after they possessed the Land. For example, when they went to battle against cities located “very far from” them, they were to kill only the men (i.e., their army). The women, children, and animals were spared; they were integrated into Israelite society, and their possessions were taken as “the spoils of war” (see Deuteronomy 20:1-15). What we read here in Deuteronomy 7 wasn’t the standard for warfare in the entire OT.

Notice the emphasis on avoiding idolatry in verses 3 and following:

3 “Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. 4 “For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you.

As Chris Wright points out, “The issue was idolatry, not ethnicity” (*The God I Don't Understand*). Whenever the people of Israel intermarried with other nations, they ended up worshiping their gods. As we've seen throughout Deuteronomy, God's covenant with Israel required exclusive, comprehensive, and whole-hearted devotion. He wouldn't share His people with other gods.

5 “But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.  
6 “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

This is the reason why God commanded the Israelites to conquer the Land: so that they could be a holy people, separate from all the other peoples on the face of the earth. Israel would be a showcase of God's mercy and grace and power. Through Israel God would introduce the Messiah who would bring blessing to all the families of the earth. Israel could not fulfill her calling unless she occupied the Land and lived out her holiness as stipulated in the old covenant.

Beginning in verse 7 we have a clarification that Israel needed to hear over and over throughout her history. Moses reminds them that God didn't choose them to be His people and to occupy the Land because they were the best and the strongest.

7 “The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Israel's victory in battle wouldn't be a function of their military might. It would be a function of God's covenant faithfulness. However (and this is central, not some minor detail), Israel had to live up to her covenant obligations in order to experience God's power and protection:

9 “Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments;

As in the new covenant, obedience wasn't some optional add-on, as if God didn't care how they behaved as long as they had the right set of beliefs. No, the old covenant required that they love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and might. Whereas the second command promised that God would visit “the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and fourth generations of those who hate” Him, here God promises that His lovingkindness would extend to “a thousandth generation” to those who love Him and keep His commandments. By contrast:

10 but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face.

The Canaanites (who hated God) would soon experience God's judgment. And the Israelites themselves would experience God's judgment in later generations when they refused His love and abandoned Him. Deuteronomy 28 explains that if they fail to obey God's commandments, He would do the very same things to them that He was doing to the Canaanites. And so once again Moses pleads with the people in verse 11:

11 "Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them.

Obedience was the pathway to God's blessing and fulfilling their mission as a light to the nations.

The "conquest of Canaan" suggests at least a couple of applications. The first has to do with God's commitment to our holiness; the second has to do with our commitment to holiness.

***The conquest of Canaan reflects God's fierce commitment to establish us as "a holy people."***

After reading Deuteronomy 7, there's no doubt that God had a fierce commitment to establishing the Israelites in the Land as "a holy people," right? They were to remove everything and everyone that was unholy. They were to be set apart to God alone. We need to understand that in the new covenant ***God still has a fierce commitment to establishing us as a holy people.***

We see this commitment first and foremost in the way He accomplished our salvation. Could there anything more fierce on the Father's part than sending His one and only Son as a sacrifice for sin? Since the wages of sin is death and since God wanted us, He provided a once-for-all sacrifice, His Son, Jesus Christ. The wrath that we deserved fell upon Him.

From eternity past, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoyed unbroken, loving unity. When Jesus became one of us, it wasn't merely a 33-year commitment (Jesus' time on earth). He would become fully God and fully man from that time forward into eternity. He bears in His body for eternity the scars of our salvation. We simply cannot fathom a more fierce commitment than that. The Triune God is "all in" in relation to our holiness.

Not surprisingly, those who trust in Jesus alone are now declared to be holy. We are told that the death and resurrection of Jesus actually provides holiness for those who believe. We find this truth in passages such as 1 Peter 2:9–10. Speaking to believers, Peter piles up phrases that originally referred to ancient Israel.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called

you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We have become a holy nation, a people for God's own possession so that we can fulfill the mission of proclaiming God's glory to the ends of the earth.

***The conquest of Canaan reflects the intensity of the spiritual battle in our lives.***

In some ways, we see a shift in emphasis from the physical in the old covenant to the spiritual in the new covenant. For example, generally speaking, **judgment** in the old covenant was physical and immediate; we see that clearly in Deuteronomy. But judgment in the new covenant is depicted as spiritual and eternal. There are certainly exceptions, but that is generally the case.

Most relevant for today's passage is the observation that **warfare** in the old covenant was most commonly physical, against "flesh and blood." Israel's enemies were other humans who hated God and His purposes on earth. Sometimes God commanded Israel to kill her enemies.

Warfare is very different for us as believers in Jesus in the new covenant. We still have human enemies, but we aren't commanded to kill them. Jesus told Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Put up your sword." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus didn't say, "Kill your enemies," but rather, "Love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Our mission now involves loving and reaching people like Saul of Tarsus. He went from being a "persecutor and a violent aggressor" (I Timothy 1) to being a slave of Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians 6, Paul explained that our warfare is not against "flesh and blood," but against spiritual forces of wickedness. The opposition that we face is ultimately spiritual.

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

If you continue reading in Ephesians 6 you will see that the weapons that are effective in the spiritual realm are things like truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer.

Even though our warfare is not against flesh and blood but is spiritual, there are some striking parallels between their warfare and ours. As with the Israelites, God fights our battles **as** we "take up the full armor of God" and move forward in faith and truth.

When you think about the battles you face in this life, do you think about other humans? Or do you think about the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places? I'm not suggesting that we don't have human enemies, people who oppose us and who try to thwart what God is doing in our lives; but our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It may be that you are spiritually frustrated and stuck because you haven't really engaged the spiritual battle through truth, the gospel, faith, the Word, and prayer.

Spiritual warfare is a big topic that we don't have time to explore this morning. But my strong encouragement is that we ***engage the spiritual battle with the type of intensity that reflects the fact that we have an enemy who is seeking to destroy us.*** And we do so with confidence because of God's fierce commitment to our holiness.