

Destroying the Canaanites

By David Feddes

¹ When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, ² and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. ³ You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. ⁵ But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire. (Deuteronomy 7:1-5)

This is not the kind of passage you choose because it is your favorite. If it is your favorite, you probably have a major problem. If someone reads this passage, and the further passages that speak of the destruction that was actually carried out—when various towns and cities were conquered, and every living thing in them was wiped out—if you can read such passages and say, “Hey, that was cool,” then you have a problem. Because anybody who has a heart with any sensitivity and a mind that thinks can find this kind of statement disturbing—that God would give such a command, and that God's chosen people would be expected to carry it out.

Did God really say this?

When you read such things in the Scriptures, you wonder again, did God really say this? Deuteronomy 7:2 says, “You must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them” (Deuteronomy 7:2). “But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 20:16–18).

This command, and the way in which it was at least partially carried out, has troubled many Christians. C.S. Lewis, in writing about this passage, commented that he believed that Joshua was wrong to carry out these orders and that it was wrong that these orders were given. He said that the doctrine of the goodness of God is more important than the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Lewis thought that we must conclude that at some points the Bible was mistaken, if we're going to hold on to our view that God is good.

I think there is an element of wisdom in what Lewis says. I do not agree with him that the Bible contains errors. But the element of wisdom is that sometimes, at the very least, you have to say, “Boy, this part of the Bible gives me a headache, and I do not know what to make of it. Rather than try to figure it all out, I'm going to put it on hold if I can't make sense of it and simply trust that God is good, no matter what kind of headache this kind of passage gives me.” You're not necessarily saying there are errors in the Bible, but you are saying, “I don't know what to make

of this. I know God is good. I know that we as followers of Jesus aren't commanded to behave in that manner in relation to our enemies anymore. I know that much. So, I'll just move on from there." That's the way perhaps a lot of us have handled the passage—kind of skating over it. Sometimes it is the better course of wisdom to not ponder hard passages too deeply when you need to focus on God's goodness, his mercy, his love, and his forgiveness.

But there does come a time too to say, "Let's try our very best with the help of God to understand what is actually going on." And let's not just take the easy way out in saying, maybe it was just a Bible mistake. Instead, let's face that question squarely: Did God really say this?

Let's see what the New Testament says. Stephen, just before he was martyred and saw heaven open and Jesus at the right hand of God, said this: "The Israelites dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers" (Acts 7:45). The apostle Paul said, "After destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave their land to his people as their inheritance" (Acts 13:19). The book of Hebrews says, "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient" (Hebrews 11:31). Again and again, followers of Jesus in the New Testament take it as a given that God did this, that God commanded it, that he destroyed those nations in Canaan.

Some people focus on the red letters. They feel free to ignore most of the Bible and focus only on direct quotes from Jesus. Well, even that approach won't make this issue go away. What does Jesus think of Deuteronomy? It seems to have been his favorite book of the Old Testament. When Jesus was asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he said, "You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother'" (Mark 10:19, quoting Deuteronomy 5). He is quoting from the Ten Commandments, which are located in Deuteronomy 5.

When Jesus is asked, "What is the most important commandment of all?" he quotes Deuteronomy 6: "'The most important is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'" (Mark 12:29–30, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4–5). We just read Deuteronomy 7 this morning. The Savior quoted chapters 5 and 6 to declare what was of utmost importance. Would he think chapter 7 was not the words of God?

Jesus also quotes from Deuteronomy 8. When Jesus faced Satan, how did he defeat Satan? Satan three times tempts Jesus. One temptation is, "Change these stones to bread and look out for yourself." Jesus replies, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord'" (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). "I will give you the whole world," says Satan, "if you fall down and worship me." Jesus says, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matthew 4:10, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13). Then Satan says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the highest point of the temple, and let the angels catch you and show everybody that you're the Son of God." And Jesus says, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:7, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16). So, when Jesus is dealing with the devil himself, what does he do? He quotes from Deuteronomy 6 and Deuteronomy 8. And if you do more study of the Gospels, you find many places where Jesus is quoting from the book of Deuteronomy. The fact of the matter

is, Jesus is the Lord God Yahweh. He is the one who gave the order in Deuteronomy 7 to destroy the Canaanites.

As we weigh the terrible command to wipe out those cities, we have to consider some key facts. They might not make everything okay. They might even make some things harder in our minds, but they are things revealed in God's Word.

Key facts

- God's earlier judgments in the Flood, Sodom, and Egypt were very severe.
- God gives life and has the right to take it.
- God spoke directly and clearly to Moses.
- Killing would have been wrong if driven by Israel's greed or cruelty, but it was right for the Israelites to obey God's command.
- Horror at total destruction comes only because God taught a people the value of human life, forgiveness, and loving enemies.
- This was unique, not a universal command.
- God waited 500 years to judge Canaanites, while Israelites suffered much of that time.
- Canaanites were unusually vile and cruel.
- Targeted only Canaanites, not other people.
- God did not allow Israelites to occupy any other land than what He gave them.
- If an Israelite city served other gods, it was to be totally destroyed. (Deut. 13:12-18)

The destruction of the Canaanites isn't the first judgment that you find in the Bible. The flood covered the whole world, and a total of eight people were spared (Genesis 6–8). In Sodom, only three people made it out alive when God's judgment fell on that city (Genesis 19). When God struck down the firstborn of Egypt, even including the babies, that was a very severe judgment (Exodus 12:29–30).

We need to face the simple fact that we live on this earth only as long as God gives us. God gives life. He has the right to take it. Even so, the command to wipe out the Canaanites is particularly difficult because it wasn't just God ending lives by sending diseases, or God sending plagues, or God sending floods, or God sending fire from heaven—it was God telling people to do this. That is perhaps makes it a harder thing than simply God sending the judgment directly: that he gives this command to people.

We also need to face the fact that God spoke directly and clearly to Moses. "God spoke with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exodus 33:11). God sometimes spoke to other prophets in somewhat less direct and more mysterious ways. But when he spoke to Moses, he spoke in a very direct and audible form, which couldn't be misunderstood. And Joshua, Moses' apprentice, was also often in that tent of meeting where the glory of the Lord came (Exodus 33:11). Moses and Joshua were very unlikely to misunderstand the one who had revealed to them all these other great truths as well. So, we need to just accept the fact that God did indeed speak directly and clearly to Moses.

We also need to face the fact that killing all those people would have been absolutely wrong if they were doing it just because they were greedy for what those people had, or just because they were cruel and nasty and enjoyed slaughtering people and doing horrible atrocities. It would have been absolutely wicked had they done it out of those motivations. But it is always right to obey God's command. In this case, it was a direct command from God to destroy the Canaanites, so it was right that they should obey it.

Here's another fact to keep in mind: we feel horror at total destruction only because God taught his people the value of human life, forgiveness, and loving enemies. Why do some of us find this passage so troubling? Because we have been shaped in a certain manner. We have been shaped by the God who has revealed himself as a God of faithfulness, and mercy, and love. We've been shaped by Jesus' message, "Love your enemies" (Deuteronomy 10:19; Matthew 5:44) which was also rooted in the book of Deuteronomy too. The reason we find this kind of passage hard to handle is exactly because we've been shaped by the God who gave it. God set apart for himself a people, the Israelites, in a world that did not value human life, in a world that was absolutely unforgiving, in a world where the only thing you ever did with enemies was wipe them out. And God had to set that people apart absolutely, so that they would be a different people. And it is only because through that people and through the Judeo-Christian message that we even have the message that human life matters, that forgiveness is important, and that we are to love our enemies. By the way, before we get on our high horse about the killing of Canaanite babies—there were a lot fewer babies in those towns than are killed in any given year in Planned Parenthood clinics. So before we get too snooty and say, "That was horrible what they did back there 3,400 years ago," we should really pay attention to what goes on right now. At any rate, it is only because God established his truth among the people of Israel that we even have the sensitivities to object.

Another key fact is that this destruction was unique. This was not a universal command. This was not God saying, "Here's how you shall always treat everybody you don't like." God did not say that. He limited it to this particular moment in history and this particular people. The people of Israel were to take this particular land from these particular nations, and they weren't to go any further than that. Those are the boundaries that God set for them.

Another fact to keep in mind: God waited 500 years to bring this judgment on Canaan. His dear friend Abraham, dated around 2000 BC, lived 175 years. But from the time of Abraham to the time of the Exodus and into the conquest of Canaan would be roughly 500 years. Now, what happened to Israel during that time? God had promised Abraham that land. In the meantime, God said, "You're not going to get it yet, because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. They're not bad enough yet for me to wipe them out totally, but in 500 years, it's going to hit that point. This means that for 400 years your people are going to be slaves in another land" (Genesis 15:13–16). So God let his own people suffer for 400 years without a land because he was being so patient with the Canaanites. We wonder, how could God give a command to wipe out the Canaanites? An equally good question is, why did he wait another 500 years, when his own people and his dear friend Abraham were left wandering without a land and then enslaved—just because God did not want to bring too premature and too harsh a judgment on the Canaanites.

Another point. The archaeologists, as well as the Bible, can tell you that the Canaanites were unusually vile and cruel. They had temple prostitutes and all sorts of sexual perversions and terrible things in the worship of their gods. They would burn babies and little children and young people in the fire. They would throw them alive onto the roasting hot arms of their idols and burn them (Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 32:35). This was how the Canaanites were treating their own families and their own children.

Still other facts to consider: God's command targeted only Canaanites, not other people. God didn't allow the Israelites to occupy any other land than what He gave them. They were not allowed to take whatever they wanted. God said, "You can't invade Moab. You can't take land from other nations. They are off limits. They're not yours. You don't get to invade and spread just the way you want to."

Those are all key facts that we have to keep in mind.

Let's go back for a moment to the fact that this was unique and not a universal command. Sometimes passages like this have been terribly misused. Sometimes settlers in America thought it was their mandate to wipe out and destroy Native American tribes because God was giving them the land, and they had the right to exterminate anybody who was in their way. Also, I've heard people say, "If the Israelite had carried out that command back then and wiped out all of the Canaanites, you wouldn't have the problem with Israelis and Palestinians today. They should have wiped them out back then." That is terribly wrong thinking. The people who are called Palestinians are not descendants of the Canaanites. They are the descendants of Ishmael. The Arabs today are descendants of Ishmael, and God said that he was going to make of Ishmael's descendants great nations (Genesis 17:20). We have to see the limits of this command to wipe out the Canaanites.

Oh, and one more thing that's really important. If you were an Israelite but acted like a Canaanite, you got what they got. It's not that an Israelite had a racial right to be a total rotter and to worship other gods. But it was not racism against the Canaanites. If an Israelite city served other gods, it was commanded in Deuteronomy to totally destroy that city, just the way you would have destroyed one of the Canaanite cities (Deuteronomy 13:12–17). If you act like them, you meet their fate. "You shall purge the evil from your midst" is a refrain that comes up over and over again for how Israel ought to treat their own idolaters and wicked people (Deuteronomy 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 22, 24; 24:7). Deuteronomy 8 says, "If you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 8:19–20). God warned them: if you act like the people whom I've just wiped out, you will face the same result.

Let's try to get at least a glimpse of why God would command such things.

Fragile foothold

- God's revelation and salvation for a lost, wicked world had its only foothold in Israel.

- Israel was fragile; paganism was strong.
- Main conflict was not racial but religious: God-lovers against God-haters.
- Israel had to separate from gods of other nations before leading other nations to God.
- Patriarchs were nomads without a land.
- Israelites had a weakness for other gods.

God had a plan to bring his revelation and salvation into a world that was totally lost and totally dark, where nobody really knew him. He called Abraham out of an idol-worshiping family, and that was just one little group. Knowledge of God, and love for God, and obedience to God were nearly lost to the whole world. And so, he decided to deal with one people and make a start from there. God's revelation and salvation for a lost, wicked world had its only foothold in Israel.

Israel was fragile. Paganism was everywhere, and it was strong. The main conflict was not racial. It was a religious conflict between God-lovers and God-haters.

Even before taking any of the land, God told his people to separate from the gods of other nations before they could lead other nations to God. That's why God said, "You cannot make a covenant with them." When making a covenant among nations in those days, you recognized the legitimacy of the other nation's gods—that they were real and that they were valid—and you recognized the right of the two nations to intermarry and to worship each other's gods. You could not make a covenant like that if there was only one true God. If God had allowed the Israelites to make a covenant like that and let things take their course, the knowledge of God would have been lost to the world. God's plan to bring salvation to all nations through Israel would have failed.

God started with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These patriarchs were nomads without a land. They just wandered. They didn't have a true land of their own. They didn't have a group of people to identify with. Lot got a place of his own, but that didn't work out so well. Lot settled in Sodom (Genesis 13:12), and Lot's daughters were corrupted by Sodom. His sons-in-law were wiped out in the destruction of Sodom. His wife was destroyed and became a pillar of salt when God destroyed Sodom (Genesis 19:26). Settling didn't work out so well. So, God had his people living as nomads, where they wouldn't get attached to any pagan way of doing things. He called Abraham out of the land of Ur (Genesis 12:1), and then he kept him on the move.

All along, the Israelites had a weakness for other gods, even before God gave them their own land. They were attracted to some of the gods of Egypt. God judged those gods with the plagues and brought the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 12:12). He brought them to Mount Sinai, revealed the Ten Commandments, and commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7). Less than two months later, they were worshipping a golden calf (Exodus 32). They were not exactly stalwarts, who were always strong in faith and devoted to God. They had a terrible weakness for other gods, and if they mingled with the nations who worshiped other gods, they soon would be worshipping them too.

God told them, "It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out before you, and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to

your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people” (Deuteronomy 9:5–6). God gave them the land of the Canaanites because the Canaanites were ripe for judgment, and God decided to bring his judgment upon them. It was because of their wickedness that they lost the land. It was not because Israel was so wonderful that God was giving the land to them. In fact, part of the command to wipe out the Canaanites is precisely because Israel was so weak and so vulnerable to sin and wickedness. If they intermingled, Israel would be corrupted.

History lessons

Bible history bears this out. God brought down the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:20). Joshua and the Israelites completely destroyed everything in Jericho (Joshua 6:21), and they handled some other towns in a similar fashion. But even in the destruction of Jericho, a man named Achan decided to swipe for himself a bit of gold and a fancy garment and some really nice stuff that he wanted. The Israelites were not allowed to take any plunder or any good stuff from the people they defeated. They were to just destroy it all, not enrich themselves from it. But Achan took some things, and his sin was discovered. He and his family and everything that he owned was treated just like the inhabitants of Jericho and wiped out (Joshua 7:1, 24–25). Meanwhile, Rahab, a prostitute from Jericho, wanted to follow the true God, and she was spared (Joshua 6:17, 22–25). If you decided to join up with the true God of Israel, you could be spared. But if you were going to act like God’s commands didn’t matter, you could be wiped out the way that Achan was wiped out.

As history unfolded, Joshua and his generation captured a lot of the cities of the land, and they destroyed the Canaanites in those cities. But the Israelites didn’t complete the job. They settled down among the Canaanites. During the period of the Judges, they were worshiping the gods of the Canaanites much of the time (Judges 2:10–13). God sent judgment on them, and in their distress they would cry out to the Lord, and he would rescue them. But then, in a 40-year cycle, they would do it all over again. Then they did it again. Then they did it again. They had this terrible pattern of them falling into the terrible practices of those false gods around them.

In the time of Samuel the prophet, there’s a revival. The Bible says when Samuel was a boy, the word of the Lord was rare in those days (1 Samuel 3:1). When Samuel came preaching the word of the Lord, there was a great return to God among many people. King Saul, the first king of Israel, was told, “You’ve got to wipe out the Amalekites.” They’re terrible enemies of God. Saul wipes out most of them, but he keeps some of the good stuff, and he spares his fellow king, Agag. Samuel comes up to Saul and says, “What’s all this bleating of sheep that I hear and all these animals around here?” And Saul says, “I was going some of them to make a sacrifice to the Lord.” Samuel fires back, “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:1–23). (By the way, Jesus later on quotes those very words in the New Testament.) The kingship was taken away from Saul for keeping plunder and not killing King Agag. “That sounds mean. Wasn’t God hard on Saul?” But centuries later, you read about somebody named Haman, the Agagite, a descendant of Agag. Ever heard of Haman? He’s the man who tried to wipe out the entire people of Israel? (Esther 3:1–6). We might claim to know better than God, but when God gives a

command, it's based on his wisdom and knowledge of all things past, present, and future.

We might shudder at what God told the Israelites to do to the Canaanites or the Amalekites, but if it wasn't death for them, it would have meant death for Israel. If we think those were horrible atrocities, perhaps we should look at more recent history. In World War II, how did the United States and its allies treat the cities of Germany and the cities of Japan? We call ourselves the good guys, and we were on the side of right. But the fact is that entire cities were firebombed. A couple of cities were hit with nuclear weapons. Those things were done in the name of preserving civilization against the aggression of Hitler and Tojo. It's amazing what people will do when it seems like evil is going to take over and destroy everything.

Eventually Solomon became Israel's king. The Bible says, "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods' [quoting Deut 7:3-4]. Solomon clung to these women in love, and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God (1 Kings 11:1-4). The great temple that Solomon built for the Lord is often remembered, but what's not remembered so well is that he also built temples for the gods of his wives right there in Jerusalem. Solomon, the great son of David, led Israel into the worship of these other gods, which eventually turned into child sacrifice and temple prostitution, into all kinds of horrid practices. Solomon's behavior led to the split of the kingdom, in which the ten tribes began to worship the golden calves and then the Baals and then all the gods of the Canaanites (1 Kings 11:5-8; 12:28-30; 2 Kings 17:16-17).

What happens after centuries of Israel's idolatry? The ten tribes are absolutely removed. "They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, and they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings. Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only (2 Kings 17:17-18). Acting like Canaanites led to being punished like Canaanites.

Then judgment fell on Judah. One of the horrible kings was Manasseh. Even though he did repent late in life and was himself saved, "Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord had destroyed before the people of Israel" (2 Kings 21:1-9; 2 Chronicles 33:10-13). If your nation gets worse than the Canaanites, the future is grim. Judgment came. The Lord destroyed the temple in Jerusalem by sending Nebuchadnezzar and the armies of the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:8-10). "For because of the anger of the Lord it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out from his presence" (2 Kings 24:20). "They kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, until there was no remedy (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

The Israelites didn't deal with the spiritual cancer. There are different ways to deal with cancer. It's a horrible disease. If you're told that a radical surgery will get rid of it all, you might not want to undertake such a radical surgery. You might want to undertake lesser measures, or no measures at all. But sometimes that radical measure is the only thing that will do it, and the lesser measures might go on for years and years and cause more pain and affliction. And that's what

happened with Israel. They were commanded not to mingle with those Canaanites. It took more than a thousand years for God to turn the Israelites into true monotheists. They went through this and that and the other thing. Finally, when the terrible judgment came, they learned the largest part of that lesson, to worship God alone.

When Jerusalem fell and the temple was burned, Lamentations says, “In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old... you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity” (Lamentations 2:21). Babies killed, women killed, men killed—terrible judgment. The whole book of Lamentations is written about that. By the way, that’s the book where we get our song “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22–23). It’s in the midst of these kinds of judgments that people believed in the faithfulness of God, and in the goodness of God, and supremely in the holiness of God.

God dealt with his people Israel, and they went into exile. What happened to them then? In exile, away from their land, with most of their people dead and only a small remnant here and there, they finally gave up on the idols. Strange as that may seem—it seemed maybe that their God had been defeated and the idols had won—but it was right then, under those terrible judgments, that they understood at last that there is one God. They understood, “We cannot act like Canaanites and be blessed like Israelites.” And it was in exile, after about a thousand years of all of ups and downs in their relationship to God, that Israel finally became pretty consistently believers in one God who followed the teachings and commandments of the Lord.

Final judgment

Ultimately, there is coming a final judgment when God brings his own into a great heritage. There will be a complete separation. Jesus speaks of God sending his angels, and they will sort out one group from another. One group will enter into glory and bliss, and the others into eternal judgment and destruction (Matthew 13:41–43, 49–50). In Revelation it says, “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:7–8). The God who spoke in Deuteronomy 7 also spoke in Revelation. There will be a great separation, and nothing wicked will enter into the eternal city (Revelation 21:27).

Like it or not, that’s what it says, and part of us should like it, because God does it for a reason. He does it to keep out the cancer. He does it to keep out what would otherwise destroy or ruin heaven itself. He cannot let evil and sin into his heaven because, for one thing, he is too pure to look on evil, and for another, his people will be destroyed by evil if he lets it in (Habakkuk 1:13; Revelation 21:27). We need to understand God’s absolute, fierce, final determination to wipe out anything that continues in opposition to him, and anything that poisons the well-being of the people and of the world that he loves. God is absolutely holy, and he is absolutely determined to do that.

And that is why, from a biblical point of view, the cross solves a very difficult problem. How can such a holy and righteous God declare righteous anybody who has any sin at all? This God, who

had sent such terrible judgments, took the worst of the judgments upon himself in the person of his Son. That is the only way that such a holy God could spare sinners and then turn them into righteous people. He did that, first of all, by paying the terrible penalty himself on the cross (Romans 3:25–26; 2 Corinthians 5:21) and then by sending into us the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

One reason Israel was so vulnerable to sin was that they did not have that tremendous indwelling power that would be unleashed through the New Covenant and through our Lord Jesus Christ (Ezekiel 36:26–27; Romans 8:9). Today, we're not called to wipe out everybody around us just because otherwise we're so weak that we're going to be corrupted quickly unless we obliterate them. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). We can be in the world and not of it (John 17:14–16).

Overcome evil, destroy strongholds

We have to take to heart the message here in Deuteronomy 7 and how it applies to us today. It does not apply to us by saying, "Strap on your sword, haul out your gun, and wipe out everybody that you think is bad." That's not our judgment call to make. God gave a direct revelation to Moses to wipe out the Canaanites. He hasn't given you or me a direct command to wipe out our enemies. In fact, he has given quite the opposite. He says this is the day of grace. This is the age of the New Covenant. This is the age where you, in a special way, love your enemies. You still need to fight evil. You still need to overcome it, but—as an old song says—"not with swords loud clashing or roll of stirring drums. With deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes."

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). How do you do that? "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:14, 21). The apostle Paul says elsewhere, "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:4–5). We still need a warfare mentality. But it is not a warfare mentality of destruction by weapons, or of obliterating and attacking all who oppose us, but instead of overcoming them with good, and with the divine weapons of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). That's how we are to live in this world and overcome and bring God's message to it and win many people to him.

The new holy nation

- The holy nation of the old covenant was Israel: one people with one land.
- The holy nation of the new covenant is the church: many peoples living in many lands.
- The church does not govern any particular nation or punish unchurched evildoers.
- The church teaches God's ways and rebukes sin. The church excommunicates (but doesn't execute) blatant sinners who claim to be Christians but refused to repent.

Just a word about the new holy nation and how things are different from one covenant to the next. The holy nation of the old covenant was Israel. It was one people out of all the peoples of

the world. It was one land in a particular geographic location. The holy nation of the New Covenant is the Church, which has many peoples living in many lands all over the world (1 Peter 2:9–10; Revelation 5:9–10). God’s program is not to locate one land and purge it of all the wicked who live in it, but rather to place his people in all the lands and have the Church exist as a holy community among them.

The Church does not govern any particular nation. The Church is not called upon to punish unchurched evildoers. We’re not called to run the government, bear the power of the sword, and punish those who are not obeying the laws of God, who don’t claim to be followers of Jesus at all. (Romans 13:4 refers to government, not the Church). The Church is to teach God’s ways—the way of salvation and the way of following Jesus—and to rebuke sin. And when the Church has to deal with sinners within it, the manner that it deals with them is by excommunicating, but not executing, blatant sinners who claim to be Christians but refuse to repent (1 Corinthians 5:1–5). So, there is a shift between Israel and how it conducted itself as a people and how the Church is to conduct itself.

Still, there is a call to remove the evil from among you. The apostle Paul talks about that in 1 Corinthians 5. “Let him who has done this be removed from among you... Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:2, 13). That’s done by kicking him out of the Church, not by killing him. Later on, after the person repents, the apostle says, “This punishment by the majority is enough; so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

Church discipline is to be used only in the most severe and grievous cases of obvious and public sin. Church discipline is not meant for Church leaders to get really pleased with their authority and to pull rank and say, “When you disagree with me, you’re out of here, because you’re supposed to submit to authority.” It’s been abused in that manner many times throughout history, just as some of the commands of the Bible get abused. It’s not meant to be a way to just pull rank and say leaders are always right so they can boot out anybody who disagrees.

Also, authority is not used to settle every little spat between two different believers in the Church. Sometimes the Church has to help people to bear with one another, but not weigh in on one side or the other and give the boot and say, “You’re excluded from the kingdom of God and of Christ.”

Having said all that, there is a role for church discipline, and it has something in common with those Deuteronomy commands regarding the Canaanites. The Church is in serious trouble if it thinks it can survive allowing obvious, grievous, unrepentant sin to continue within it. People who continue in that manner do need to be removed—and then, if they repent, to be restored.

The command not to intermarry with the Canaanites—there’s a New Testament version of that: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:14–16). The command to

kill idol worshipers is no longer in effect. But the importance of separation—of being a holy people of a Holy God—that remains. And it's as important as ever not to be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14).

No compromise with Canaan

- Spiritual warfare overcomes evil with good using spiritual weapons.
- Church discipline removes unrepentant sinners and restores those who repent.
- Holy separation avoids compromise with the world and yoking with unbelievers.
- Reverent awe worships the Holy One who will completely destroy all evil and will settle his people in a perfect land forever.

To summarize, what does “no compromise with Canaan” mean for us today? It means that we're still involved in warfare, just as they were then. But it's a different kind of warfare that overcomes evil with good, using spiritual weapons and not physical weapons (Romans 12:21; 2 Corinthians 10:3–4).

Church discipline, rather than execution, removes unrepentant sinners. It's hard to restore somebody who's been executed, but when somebody has been excommunicated, that's a great opportunity for grace and for receiving somebody back in and restoring them (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

Holy separation is an important ongoing principle. It's one that the Church needs to pay more attention to these days. Avoid compromise with the world. Avoid yoking together with unbelievers and pretending all religions are just fine. There are great differences among religious teachings, and the way of Jesus is very different. If you want to follow the way, let's say, of Hinduism—less than a century ago, they were still burning widows and still do in some of the outlying villages. So there are certain kinds of religion that do terrible things. And in our own society, we need to be aware of the temptation to compromise.

Finally, and most importantly, reverent awe. This is especially important to consider in our own time, because there's a version of God that has gotten a little too nice, a little too tame, a little too wimpy, and a little too friendly with everything that is evil in our own time. With that view of God, we can hardly figure out why Jesus had to die. Why all the fuss about salvation through the cross, when God would be too nice to punish anybody anyway? We have lost the Holy One of Israel. We have lost the One whose throne is built on righteousness (Psalm 89:14). We have lost the One whose eyes are too pure to look on sin (Habakkuk 1:13).

As we read passages that we might not like very much, we might begin to rediscover the real God, not the one we invented. The One who isn't whoever we want him to be or imagine him to be, but the “I Am who I Am.” The One who says, “The Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Exodus 34:6–7). In reverent awe we worship that Holy One, who's going to completely destroy all evil. He's going to destroy it all and will settle his people in the promised land—those who live by faith and trust in him, who are washed

by the blood of Jesus Christ, who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He will bring them, and only them, into that promised land (Revelation 21:7–8; Hebrews 12:28–29).

Prayer

Dear Lord, minister to us by your Holy Spirit, and help us when we consider hard passages like this that jolt us and even offend us. We pray that we will trust your goodness, and know that your love is real, and know that you are all that you've revealed yourself to be in our Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, Lord, help us take to heart these facts about your holiness, the reality of your judgment, and the need to be your peculiar people, set apart to the Lord. Make us people, Lord, who overcome evil by doing good, who seek your face, who will not compromise or make covenants with the ways of the world but seek to follow the Lamb wherever he leads (Revelation 14:4).

We pray, Lord, that your Spirit of holiness will more and more work that holiness in us—not a holiness that's arrogant or aggressive or cruel, but a holiness that is pure and separate and that looks to you. Lord, we leave all matters of vengeance and punishment in your hands, as you, Lord Jesus, have taught us. We pray even now that you will destroy many of your enemies by changing them into your friends, as you've been doing for so long, and as you have done with us. And so we pray again for our enemies.

We pray even for those who are persecutors in our world, that you will have mercy on many of them and draw them to salvation in you. We pray, Lord, that where there are those who would try to destroy your Church or try to corrupt it, you will bring them down, either by humbling them before your throne and making them into Christians, or by breaking their strength and bringing your judgment upon them. Holy Father, show yourself mighty and righteous and holy and good and loving and pure in our own time and in our own lives. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Destroying the Canaanites

By David Feddes

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¹ When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, ² and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. ³ You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. ⁵ But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire. (Deuteronomy 7:1-5)

Did God really say this?

You must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. (Deuteronomy 7:2)

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18)

New Testament agrees

Stephen: "They dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers." (Acts 7:45)

Paul: "After destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, God gave them their land as an inheritance." (Acts 13:19)

Hebrews: "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient." (Hebrews 11:31)

Jesus and Deuteronomy

"You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" (Mark 10:19 = Deut. 5:16-20)

Jesus said "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" (Mark 12:29-30 = Deut. 6:4-5)

Jesus defeated Satan's three temptations by saying three times, "It is written..." and quoting from Deuteronomy.

Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (8:3)

It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve. (6:13)

You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. (6:16)

Key facts

- God's earlier judgments in the Flood, Sodom, and Egypt were very severe.
- God gives life and has the right to take it.
- God spoke directly and clearly to Moses.
- Killing would have been wrong if driven by Israel's greed or cruelty, but it was right for the Israelites to obey God's command.
- Horror at total destruction comes only because God taught a people the value of human life, forgiveness, and loving enemies.
- This was unique, not a universal command.
- God waited 500 years to judge Canaanites, while Israelites suffered much of that time.
- Canaanites were unusually vile and cruel.
- Targeted only Canaanites, not other people.
- God did not allow Israelites to occupy any other land than what He gave them.
- If an Israelite city served other gods, it was to be totally destroyed. (Deut. 13:12-18)

So shall you perish

You shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deut 13:5, 17:7, 17:12, 21:21, 22:21,22,24)

And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God. (Deut. 8:19-20)

Fragile foothold

- God's revelation and salvation for a lost, wicked world had its only foothold in Israel.
- Israel was fragile; paganism was strong.
- Main conflict was not racial but religious: God-lovers against God-haters.
- Israel had to separate from gods of other nations before leading other nations to God.
- Patriarchs were nomads without a land.
- Israelites had a weakness for other gods.

Not your righteousness

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. (Deut. 9:5-6)

Foreign women and gods

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women... from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love... And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God. (1 Kings 11:1-4)

Ten tribes removed

They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them... And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings... Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. (2 Kings 17:15-18)

Acting like the Canaanites led to being punished like the Canaanites.

Judgment on Judah

Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel. (2 Kings 21:9)

For because of the anger of the Lord it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out from his presence. (2 Kings 24:20)

They kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy. (2 Chronicles 36:16)

In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old... you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity. (Lamentations 2:21)

Final judgment

The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” (Revelation 21:7-8)

Overcome evil, destroy strongholds

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God. (2 Cor 10:4-5)

The new holy nation

The holy nation of the old covenant was Israel: one people with one land.

The holy nation of the new covenant is the church: many peoples living in many lands.

The church does not govern any particular nation or punish unchurched evildoers.

The church teaches God's ways and rebukes sin. The church excommunicates (but doesn't execute) blatant sinners who claim to be Christians but refused to repent.

Remove, then restore

There is sexual immorality among you... Let him who has done this be removed from among you... Purge the evil person from among you. (1 Cor 5:1-13)

This punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Cor 2:6-8)

Don't be unequally yoked

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. (2 Corinthians 6:14-16)

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