

The Warrior God: Part Two

Joshua 7:1-26

The “Jesus as warrior” theme is empowering when we face Satanic temptation, demonic harassment, political opposition, or persecution by militants from other religions (or no religion). Yet there is a less rosy aspect of God as warrior: Scripture warns us that, when deserved, God fights against his own people. And not just in the Old Testament.

Day 1: Joshua 5:13-15 God fights for his own cause

Joshua 7 forms a twin narrative with chapter 6, both under the heading of 5:13-15. This accounts for the response from the commander of the Lord’s army, when Joshua accosts him. To paraphrase:

“Are you on our side or our enemies’?”

“Neither; I am on the Lord’s side.”

“Do you have a message for me?”

“The Lord is holy; his people must also be holy.”

This exchange anticipates not only the victory over Jericho in Joshua 6, but also the defeat against Ai in Joshua 7.

Since Israel is the chosen people, God’s default option is to fight on their behalf, as in Joshua 7. But only in so far as they honor him; only in so far as they live in obedience to him. Ultimately, God is no man’s servant, no nation’s lackey. Consequently, sin causes Israel to suffer defeat at the hands of its enemies.

Even as Christians, we naturally prefer the salvation of Joshua 6 to the judgment of Joshua 7. But we do not get to pick and choose biblical texts, especially not based on our own self-interest. God is not made of silly putty, that we can mold him as we wish. That is idolatry, not worship.

Day 2: Joshua 7:1 Israel acted unfaithfully ... so the Lord’s anger burned

The wrath and judgment of God is a theme that contemporary Christians prefer to ignore, and a reality we prefer to deny. There was a time when preaching the wrath of God would bring the conversion of nonbelievers, and also repentance and revival among professing Christians. Confronted with the dangers of sin, nonbelievers would turn to Christ, and believers living in sin would repent and return to him (for example, the preaching of Jonathan Edwards during the First Great Awakening, Charles Finney during the Second Great Awakening, or, with less success, Old Testament prophets among Israel).

But at least since the time of evangelist D. L. Moody, in the second half of the eighteenth-century, evangelists and churches have downplayed God’s wrath against sin and against sinners, especially if those sinners claim to be born-again

Christians. In fact, today this is often an explicit and intentional strategy for church growth. It is so widespread that even secular sociologists and anthropologists commonly take note of it when writing about American Christianity. So we find such bald (and bold) claims as, “Christ forgives all our sins, past, present, and future.”

The slogan is popular and reassuring, though, stated without qualification, is dangerous, at best. Take this passage, for instance. Here the anger of God is not directed toward Canaanites; that was the point of Joshua 6. Here the anger of God is direct toward his people Israel! So today, the warning speaks not to unbelievers who have yet to pray to receive Christ as savior. The real parallel – as repellent as this may seem – is to those who today purport to be the people of God, those who have received Christ as savior, those who regularly attend church, yet directly disobey Christ.

By all means, let us celebrate the grace and mercy of God: this is, after all, why Christ died. At the same time, we dare not skip over the character and truth of God where we find it inconvenient. Many books of the New Testament include “sin lists” with the warning, “Those who live like this do not inherit the kingdom of God” (for example, Galatians 5:21). Joshua 7 reminds us that God means what he says, that we disobey his direct commands and warnings at our own peril. The sin lists of the New Testament confirm that this is true not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New.

Day 3: Joshua 7:1-11a God fights against Israel

The story starts out in familiar fashion: as he had with Jericho, Joshua sends out spies to investigate the defenses around Ai. They return to announce that the battle will be easy, requiring only a portion of the army. But instead of an easy victory, they suffer a serious defeat. Verse 5 ends the first stage of the narrative noting: “At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water” (7:5). Ironically, that is the same description Rahab used of Jericho when the Israelites invaded: “Our hearts melted ... all the people are melting in fear” (2:11,24). Abject fear characterizes the enemies of God, when he fights against them, not his people, when he fights for them (cf. 2:9; 5:1).

In response, Joshua freaks out. He tears his clothes and falls face down before the ark for hours (7:6): so far so good. But then grief turns to anger, and he turns on God: “Why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!” (7:7). Notably, this complaint echoes the frequent protests from Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 16:3; 17:3; Numbers 11:4-6; 14:2-4; 20:3-5), thus implying a massive failure in leadership: Joshua thinks that the failure is with God; the text lays the blame on Israel.

God will accept none of the blame. “Stop praying! Get up! This is not my fault, it is Israel who sinned and thus forfeited my blessing.” To reinforce the offensiveness of the sin, the author packs in seven references to it within a single verse: “Israel sinned,” “violated my covenant,” “I commanded them to keep,” “they have taken some of the devoted things,” “they have stolen,” “they have lied,” “they have put them with their own possessions” (7:11).

In times of crisis, whether corporate (as here) or personal, we rightly respond as Joshua did at first: we pray for God’s help. His second response – blaming God – is less noble, and we do well to avoid it (though we often fail as he did). The God who delivered them through the Jordan River was not about to desert them now; nor is the God who delivered us through Christ. Disaster in our lives is never indicative of God’s negligence or abandonment.

Might we learn also from the third response here, from God’s affirmation that the disaster is due to their sin? Certainly some crises – by no means all – are caused because sin prompts God to withhold his blessing, or even to send judgment. The pressing question is: How do we know whether a particular misfortune is the consequence of sin? We do not actually need an answer to this question. If we are actively engaged in obvious sin, then God calls us to repent even before he sends misfortune. Conversely, if we are not actively and flagrantly sinning, yet life goes hard, there is no reason to take it as divine punishment. Rather, a certain amount of misfortune is the inevitable consequence of living in a fallen world, so we simply plead for God’s help, not for his forgiveness.

Day 4: Joshua 7:11b-26 The community acts against the sin in its midst

God does not directly execute the sinner; instead, he calls on the community to do so. His threat is chilling on two counts: he threatens to depart from Israel, unless they destroy the guilty party and all that he owns.

Three additional features of this account are noteworthy. First, Achan’s confession repeats the key terms and same process from Eve’s original sin: “saw,” “coveted,” “took” (Genesis 3:6). Sin, both accounts suggest, commonly follows this trajectory. We do well to nip it at the first stage: when something – or someone – first catches our eye. Secondly, the selection process repeats the verb “take” in the NIV; this same verb typically refers to the “capture” of enemies (see 6:20; 8:19,21; 10:1,28,32,35,37,39,42; 11:10,12,17; 15:16,17; 19:47). Sin has turned Achan into an enemy of God. Thus, Achan has, in a sense, become a Canaanite to God, devoted to total destruction. Thirdly, in so acting, God acts justly: he does not have a double standard, nor does he play favorites.

While all of these points are applicable today, due to space constraints we consider only the central point. We see in the New Testament that God still

commonly leaves the discipline of sin to us, as the corporate body of his people (1 Corinthians 5). This is not something we enjoy, so few churches do it. But it is no less the command of God for us than it was for ancient Israel .

Day 5: Joshua 7 in context: two instructive contrasts

The story of Israel's defeat at Ai contrasts with at least two other incidents in this book. For one, the destruction of Achan contrasts with the salvation of Rahab (Joshua 2): a Canaanite becomes, in effect, an Israelite; while an Israelite, in effect, becomes a Canaanite. What ultimately accounts for the final destiny of each? Not ethnicity, but submission and obedience to God.

For the other, the initial defeat at Ai (Joshua 6) contrasts with the subsequent victory there (Joshua 8). What accounts for the turn of events? Between the two battles, Israel learned of sin in its midst, and removed it.

So Joshua is not comprised entirely of gloom and doom, neither is the gospel. Both bring a message of judgment against sin, coupled with an offer of grace and salvation. By the end of chapter 7, two piles of stone stand as reminders to subsequent generations: the memorial of 4:7-9 recalls God's salvation through the Jordan; the memorial of 7:26 recalls the destruction of a sinner. We naturally prefer the hopeful messages of chapters 2,4,6 and 8 to the vengeful wrath of this chapter. But the wrath and judgment of Joshua 7 are no less a part of sacred Scripture, or of God's character.

Day 6: Revelation 2-3 God fights against the church

At least two approximate parallels to Joshua 7 appear in the New Testament. We have already noted (briefly) the call in 1 Corinthians 5, that the church purge evil people from its midst, much like God demands that Israel purge Achan. Now we look at another parallel: the warning that God may fight against his people still now, as he did in Joshua 7.

Each of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation requires that they "conquer" temptations to sin or cowardice in the face of persecution in order to be saved (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). Several warn that God will punish the church if they do not reform (2:5; 3:3,16). In two cities, where particular false teachers are active, he urges the churches to expel them, lest he come and fight against the heretics. "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword ... I will soon ... fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (Rev 2:12,16). "I will cast her on a bed of suffering" (Rev 2:22). These are only partial parallels: none explicitly portrays God as punishing the group for the sins of the one; for example, "I will soon come to *you* and will fight against *them*" (2:16). That noted, the danger persists that if we defiantly disobey God, he calls his church to intervene, and threatens to fight against the unrepentant guilty.