

Marching Orders Joshua 8

There's a lot about this passage that just seems wrong. Especially this week, as much of the world has condemned Turkish Muslims invading Syria to drive out Kurdish Muslims, and as we hear about the Chinese government's atrocities against the Uyghers, we recoil at the idea of using any sort of violence in the name of religion. How could that ever be the right thing for anyone to do?

Well, make no mistake, since the coming of Christ, violence used in the name of God is always wrong. Instead, we are called to expand the Kingdom of God in only in peaceful ways – after all Jesus Himself refused to resist those who arrested and crucified Him. Thus, it was wrong for Mohammed to try to spread his faith by force, just as it was wrong for the Crusaders to try to retake Muslim lands in the same way. It was wrong for the Spanish Inquisitors or the Puritans to burn people who disagreed with them on matters of theology. Instead, as Jesus told us in our responsive reading from John chapter 15, we are called to love one another, bearing the fruit of the gospel in our lives not by killing, but by laying down our agendas, our preferences, even our very lives so that others might be saved, so that others might turn from their sin and turn to Christ.

But at the same time, both Scripture and subsequent history make it plain that sometimes God uses one nation to bring judgment upon another one because of its wickedness. God certainly used the Assyrians and the Babylonians in this way to punish His own people for their infidelity in Old Testament times. And I would guess that most Americans believe that God used the Allies to bring an end to the power-mad, racist fantasies of the Axis powers during World War II.

So when we turn to today's passage, we just have to trust God's wisdom and righteousness when He told His people to carry out His judgment, His death sentence on the Canaanites, the people living in the Promised Land. Now we know God wasn't hasty in His condemnation of the Canaanites. In fact, God told Abraham back in Genesis chapter 15 that he would withhold His judgment on them for 400 years, even though that meant leaving the Israelites in slavery in Egypt all during that time.

And we don't know exactly what sort of sin the Canaanites had been involved in for so many generations. But whatever it was, by Joshua's time, the people living in places like Ai were apparently just as odious to God as the Nazis were to us back in the 1940's, just as deserving of the judgment that God told His people to carry out on His behalf. Thus, God considered the destruction of Ai to be well deserved, even if we don't fully understand why.

Okay, but if it's true that after the coming of Christ we aren't called to carry out God's judgment in such violent ways, what can we possibly learn from this rather bloody passage? Well, at the very least, the judgment of God on Ai gives us a foreshadowing of the end of time, of what will happen to all those who turn away from God, to all those who, as Jesus put it in John chapter 15, refuse to abide in Him. For what did He say? "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." That sort of destruction may not happen to wicked individuals in this life, and we are certainly not called to carry it out in any way. But the sad and sobering fact is that, on the day Christ returns, all those who have hardened their hearts against God, all those who have cut themselves off from the only source of light and life will get the same sort of judgment the people of Ai received.

And knowing the certainty and completeness of God's justice should motivate us to bear witness of the truth of Christ, calling everyone to repentance. Of course, telling the truth about God's power and holiness, standing up for the Kingdom has never been easy – God's people have always faced opposition, and sometimes it has been fierce. That was certainly true for Joshua's army. Back in chapter 7, we learned that when Achan stole some of the items God had designated for destruction, the whole nation had been tarred with the brush of his sin. That's why they had suffered a terrible setback the first time they had tried to conquer the city of Ai.

But even after they had exposed and removed Achan's sin from among them, their old fears came flooding back, along with their uncertainty that they could, after all, conquer the Canaanites. I mean, how could the Israelites be confident that God was on their side after being implicated in such rebellion against Him? How could they go into battle for Him, if they couldn't be assured of His protection?

And maybe you wonder the same thing. Maybe when you look at all the things you've done or left undone, all the ways you've let other people down and let God down as well, maybe you think you're not good enough to be a servant of God. Even if you've professed your faith in Christ, maybe you wonder if the inconsistency of that faith somehow puts you outside the scope of God's protection and provision. In other words, maybe you're tempted to listen to Satan when he says there's no way Christ can forgive you for what you've done and thus that there's no way God could use you for His glory.

But that's not the only kind of temptation we face, is it? When we look at how quickly evil is spreading all around us, overturning standards of morality that have stood for millennia, it's easy to believe that there's nothing we can possibly do to stand it its way. And so when Satan and those who serve him insist that the followers of Christ need to "get on the right side of history," and just give in to the selfishness and cruelty all around us, when they say we should stop trying to stand for what is right and just drift along with an increasingly godless culture, well, it's easy to become as demoralized as Joshua's army was as they stood before Ai, the scene of their latest failure.

But if that's the case, then hear the good news that we find in verse 1 – "Do not fear or be dismayed." For in spite of our sin, in spite of our weakness, God has called all who trust in Him to advance the cause of His Kingdom, laying down our priorities and preferences so that others might come to know Christ. But as we do this, as we draw closer to Christ, as He fills us with His Spirit, as we abide in Him and He abides in us, as John chapter 15 says, we can be sure that God will hear our prayers. We can be sure that God will give us everything we need to accomplish His good and perfect will. And we can be just as confident that God will give us victory over the evil within us and around us as Joshua's army was confident in their victory over Ai.

But our confidence doesn't just rest on the promises of God's provision and protection – it can also rest on a more accurate assessment of the power of evil. After all, because of Christ's cross and empty tomb, the truth is that all the powers of evil have already been destroyed. So, when Satan tells us that the triumph of evil is inevitable, we need to remember that he's nothing more than a lying loser. The truth is that when Christ returns in all His glory, good will triumph just as completely and spectacularly as the Israelites destroyed the wicked people of Ai.

And how did God give His people this great victory? By demonstrating to them how weak and fallible the people of Ai really were. Oh, after their initial defeat, the people of Israel probably thought

that the men of Ai were some kind of supermen – that’s why 7:5 says that all their hearts melted and became as water. In the same way, Hitler’s propaganda machine boasted of the superiority of the Aryan race, and the unmatched innovation and productivity of German industry. Evil is really good at making itself look invincible.

But in verse 2, God told the people they could easily take the city by setting an ambush. In this way, God was reminding the people that the men of Ai were mere humans – just as subject to deception as anyone else. In the same way, we must never believe the lies of the enemy. Regardless of what their propaganda said, the Nazis were no more supermen than were the men of Ai, and neither are any of the opponents of Christ and His people today.

But if we learn from today’s passage that we can trust in the eventual triumph of God’s justice over evil, and if we learn that we do not need to be afraid of the forces of evil no matter how strong they appear to be, we also learn that we must not fall into the trap of complacency. After all, even though the Nazis weren’t supermen, the Allies still needed to fight them. Just so, all who follow Christ are called to oppose the forces of wickedness within ourselves and within the culture all around us. These battles may be winnable, but they still must be fought.

And this passage assures us that all those who fight God’s battles using God’s tactics will eventually win. After all, the only reason Joshua set an ambush for the city was because in verse 2 God told him to do just that. But in verse 2 God had also made a promise to him and to all the army: “you shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king.” In other words, God promised His people that they would achieve complete victory, as they did His will and walked according to His way.

And the same promise holds true for us today. For what did Jesus say in John chapter 15? “He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” No, we may be nothing more than branches, conduits through which the grace and truth of Christ flows into a selfish and cruel world. But the good news is that as we stand up for the Kingdom the way God wants us to, as we draw close to Christ, trusting in Him more and more, the Holy Spirit that lives in us will bear much fruit, the fruit of service, the fruit of witness, the fruit of victory over the forces of evil.

So let us not fear or be dismayed, regardless of how weak and sinful we may be, regardless of how formidable our foes may seem, regardless of how loudly the wicked may boast of their inevitable victory. For we serve an Almighty, Holy God whose justice is as certain as it will be complete. We have a loving Father Who has promised to fill us with His Spirit and answer all our prayers that are offered in accordance with His will. For no matter how little sense it may make to us, our God has chosen to win His victories even through such unworthy soldiers as we are.

So, as Charles Wesley taught us to sing, let’s get in the fight for holiness and truth. Let’s wrestle and fight against the lies and temptations all around us. Let’s pursue every virtue and cling to all the means of grace God has given us. And all the while, let’s pray for God’s help, even as we are confident that He will eventually win the victory.