

Death of The Innocent

Joshua 6

"Our God is in the heavens: he does all that he pleases"

Psalms 115:3

Introduction: There is a great amount of tension when grapple with the reality and person of God: how can He be in charge of everything and yet allow for sin to enter into the world, with the effect that many run a head-long race to hell; how can God be One God in three distinct persons; how can God become a man and not give up deity; how can Jesus be full of grace and full of truth; how can God be loving and wrathful, judge in righteousness and be merciful, and be just and loving, all in perfect unity, harmony, and without partiality?

The problem we have with these supposed paradoxes is that WE have a hard time with them. In other words, there is no tension with God in these things, because He is infinitely wise and sovereign. The problem is we see these seemingly mutually exclusive attributes as incongruous, not able to exist together equally and fully. The reason is simple: by sin entering the world, it has corrupted all of creation (Rom. 8:20-21), including our minds (Rom 1:18). This means that we CANNOT comprehend the truth of God because in our sin we suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Only when our eyes are opened by faith can we see things clearly and see God clearly.

Even when faith opens our eyes, much tension remains. Tension in and of itself is not a problem, it's how we go about trying to ease the tension, often to assuage our emotions concerning something God has said. The problem comes when we try to ease the tension with **unbiblical means**, either changing the nature of God or the clarity of God's commands (i.e. excusing God for things He doesn't excuse Himself from - Isa. 45:7; creating other ways of salvation instead of Christ alone - John 14:7; Eph. 2:8-9). When we do this, we not only miss out on seeing the greatness of God, but we run the risk of following a false gospel.

Our goal this morning is to deal with the great tension of Joshua 6 that leaves many questioning God's goodness and love. Our goal is to explain and grip the truth as laid out in scripture, and by faith continue to depend on God alone. A strange thing happens when we seek to obey even when we cannot figure everything out about God: we begin to understand God more and more, for a deeper longing for Him and the greatest joy possible.

The Big Issue of Joshua 6:

Last week we covered the events of Joshua 6 and learned that this was God's battle fought FOR His covenant people Israel, AGAINST the people of the land of Canaan (known as the Amorites). In this we saw the benefit that comes when we allow God to lead fully in our lives. However, we left the text in a bit of tension: **why did God destroy Jericho in this way?** Not just the strange way of walking around the walls for 7 days, but why was the **measure** of destruction so severe? The text of Joshua 6 captures it this way:

*As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. **Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.**" Joshua 6:20b-21*

This is the type verse, type of reality, type of truth that provides a great deal of tension. For some, this turns them off to God all together. For others, they try desperately to explain this type of action away.

For us, we want to think through this Biblically (because the Bible answers these questions!) so that we have a clear and complete view of the God that we worship and give our whole lives to.

Why did God order the death of all the people of Jericho?

To truly answer this question, we must go back to Genesis 15. In 15:12-20 God made a covenant with Abraham concerning his offspring. There are a few distinctives of this covenant that are important to Joshua 6:

- **The covenant had to do with a promise of LAND, specifically the land of Canaan**
- **The covenant would mean the people of Israel would be enslaved for 400 years**
- **It prophesied that Egypt would be judged and the people would leave with great possessions**
- **It prophesied that Israel would come back to the LAND, but not before the INIQUITY of the Amorites would reach completion**

What this shows us is that the conquest of Canaan was not random, but was something God had planned centuries before and now was the time of fruition. It also had to do with the possession of land that was physical, and a battle between God and evil that traced back to the Garden (see Gen. 3:15). But what specifically do we know or learn about God that would cause Him to kill everyone in Jericho, including women and children? We learn about **His nature and the nature of sin**, in which a holy God cannot do anything with sin except pour out his wrath on.

• **God's Nature**

God is holy (Lev. 11:44; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 15:4) This means that He is other, set apart, and cannot be corrupted by sin. We are called to holy as He is holy (1 Pet. 1:16), but we recognize our inability in our sin to uphold His holiness. God also does not compete and He does not share His glory with another (Isa. 48:11). If we do not recognize His holiness, we cannot comprehend the lengths He takes to uphold it, and we are offended by the way He acts. His holiness is what He upheld with Israel in terms of worshiping Him, which is the expression of His holiness.

Israel was called to destroy all idols not only because they were offensive to God, but because they would be swayed by them, and would thus be under God's wrath themselves:

Deuteronomy 7:1-6 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 yourselves, 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. ⁶ "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Israel was to destroy all idols so they could worship God properly:

Deuteronomy 12:1-4 These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. ² You shall surely **destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods**, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. ³ You shall **tear down their altars** and

dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. ⁴ **You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.**

There were different rules of warfare for those OUTSIDE of the land and those INSIDE:

OUTSIDE:

Deuteronomy 20:10-19 "When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. ¹¹ And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, **then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you.** ¹² But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. ¹³ And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, ¹⁴ **but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves.** And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. ¹⁵ Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here.

INSIDE:

¹⁶ **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, ¹⁷ **but you shall devote them to complete destruction**, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, ¹⁸ **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**

Israel was to **devote all the people to destruction** in order to uphold the holiness and glory of God so that they could worship God properly in the land that God brought them into.

• **Sins Nature**

Not only do we recognize God's holiness, we understand the cataclysmic nature of sin. Sin falls short of God's glory, causes death, and brings about God's wrath. Sin is always progressive, always destructive, and continuously pervasive. Sin had to be dealt with, often in extreme measures. It was because of the fullness of the iniquity of the Amorites that God had to act so widely and dramatically.

The Amorites were clearly wicked:

Deuteronomy 9:4-5 - "Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the **wickedness of these nations** that the LORD is driving them out before you. ⁵ 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.

The Amorites were involved in pervasive, demonic, and Satanic practices:

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 - "When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who **burns his son or his daughter as an offering**, anyone who **practices divination** or **tells fortunes** or **interprets omens**, or a **sorcerer** ¹¹ or a **charmer** or a **medium** or a **wizard** or a **necromancer**, ¹² **for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD.** And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³ You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, ¹⁴

for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to **fortunetellers** and to **diviners**. **But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.**

The people of Canaan were wicked. They practiced the most heinous acts known to mankind, even going so far as sacrificing their children in fire to their 'gods'. They were given over to the prince of the power of this world, to his influence, power, and thus control. They had danced with the power of hell, and were thus deserving of judgment. This was not the kind of sin that could be co-existed with, but had to be wiped out completely, to be razed, and to start over anew in a land that was intended to be a worship center to the one true God for all the world to see.

How does this help us explain the following:

Now, we recognize that this does not explain things to a point that it assuages every emotion that we feel, but it does help us answer some burning and longing questions:

DOES GOD ORDER THE DEATH OF THE INNOCENT?

The simple answer: no. Why? Because there is no one who is innocent, no one who is good, no one who seeks after God. Romans 3 says this:

Romans 3:10-18 as it is written: "**None is righteous, no, not one;** ¹¹ **no one understands; no one seeks for God.** ¹² **All** have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

We do not sin and then become sinful. We are actually born sinful, born under the wrath of God. The wages of our sin is death (Rom. 6:23), so no one is truly innocent when it comes to our sin before a holy God. We are not born into spiritual neutrality nor do we possess some amount of goodness. We are born dead in our trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1-3), and are at birth DESERVING of God's wrath.

DID THE CANAANITES EVEN HAVE A CHANCE?

We know that the Canaanites had an opportunity to know the true God and become a God followers. We know this because of one word: **Rahab**. Rahab possessed enough information about the true God (Josh 2:8-13). She was willing to turn her back on the false gods and idolatry of her people to follow the one true God. This was knowledge that was possessed by the people of Jericho, and it even caused their heart to melt and spirit to leave them. However, instead of responding to the truth, they suppressed it in unrighteousness and tried to fight their way out of it. This is exactly what people try to do today. They do not want to yield themselves to the God that is clearly there and choose to suppress the truth and find their own means of salvation/happiness/joy/whatever. Romans 1:18-32 chronicles exactly what the people of Jericho did and what people do today?

HOW COULD HE MAKE THIS COMMAND AND UPHOLD HIS LOVE, COMPASSION, GRACE, AND MERCY?

We ask the wrong questions concerning God, and when it comes to His wrath and judgment, we absolutely ask the wrong ones. We wonder why or how God could send ANYBODY to hell, how He could condemn anyone to eternal separation and judgment. The REAL QUESTION: Why does God choose to allow ANYONE into His presence and be with Him in heaven? God's nature is that of love, and it is not His desire to see any perish, yet He has to uphold His glory. Here is how the Old and New Testament explain this tension:

Ezekiel 18:21-23 - *But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. **Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the LORD God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?***

2 Peter 3:9 - *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not **wishing** that any should perish, **but that all should reach repentance.***

He is longsuffering and patient. If He were not, everyone, right now, would be thrust deservedly into hell. There is no one in heaven that deserves to be there and no one in hell who does not deserve to be there. God is gracious, kind, gracious, and merciful to send ANYONE to heaven.

WAS THIS INCONGRUOUS WITH THE TEACHING AND NATURE OF JESUS?

Jesus clearly called us to love our neighbor AND LOVE OUR ENEMY! (Matt. 5:44) We are to follow this command and seek to love those who hate us and pray for those who persecute us. Jesus came not only to show love, but to be the ultimate example of love. Some have sought to reinterpret the whole Bible through this grid of love and teachings of Jesus. However, whenever we let one part of Scripture to trump the whole, we get into all kinds of trouble. Jesus came to love, but He still responded passionately against sin (see Matt.23) and will one day bring the sword and put an end to all His enemies (Rev. 19:11-21; 20:11-15). The call to love is one that compels us to beg people to be reconciled with God so that they do not have to face the wrath of God (2 Cor. 5:17-21)

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO US AS A CHURCH AND AS FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST?

The key to this OT teaching for us is this: we have not been called to the promise of a land right now, and thus our citizenship is not here (Phil. 3:20), but is in heaven. We are not called to a holy war by taking up arms and killing those who reject Christ. In fact, we are called to love, suffer, and face persecution in order to bring the joy of the gospel to the nations. Christianity is not bound to one central place of worship, but is called to operate in every culture, nation, government system, and geographic location in the world! There is a day that the land will one day be repossessed, but Jesus will do the fighting then. Until then, we are called to worship God and call others to do the same.

WHEN IS THE DEATH OF THE INNOCENT GOOD FOR US?

So what about the death of the innocent? There is actually one time in Scripture that God called for the innocent to die because of His wrath: **Jesus Christ the Righteous**. This is where God's love and wrath collide. This is where God upholding His glory and holiness and acceptance of sinners finds its answer. Whenever we are tempted to think that God is UNFAIR to do anything, we need to take a big helping of remembering Jesus, who is God very God and suffered as a man, even death on a cross, bearing the wrath of God on Himself. He was perfectly innocent, and yet God treated Him as a vile sinner.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake **he made him to be sin who knew no sin**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Hebrews 7:26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, **innocent**, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

Romans 5:6-11 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person- though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die- ⁸ **but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** ⁹ Since, therefore, we

have now been justified by his blood, **much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.**¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 8:32 - *He who did not spare His own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him give us all things.*

When you are tempted to think God is unfair, pray this prayer: God, be unfair to me, and save me. Be unfair to me and grant me the faith to repent, to follow you, and to see you as the greatest joy.

A concluding thought:

What do we do when we are caught in the tension of the truth and our emotions? What do we do when those things seem at odds? How do we grapple with the truth? I leave you with two examples of responses:

The great theologian Matt Isch made a profound statement in our shepherding group a few weeks ago. We were talking about this subject and Matt encapsulated the conversation by saying that He still can't figure out **why** God works the way He does, but he continues to trust God and seeks to obey. This is exactly the right answer. We cannot comprehend all of God, but we have been given enough to obey, to worship, to follow, and to delight in. As we continue to do this, our faith grows and our understanding of God grows.

I leave you with a note I took off a friend's Face Book page last week (I did ask for permission). Dan and Cindy Waldeck lost their 7 year old daughter to a rare disease 7 years ago. They were left in tension between what they know about God and what they see Him doing, causing them much emotional angst. Here is Dan's note about their battle with this tension:

A Letter from Dan Waldeck 7 years after the death of his 7 year old daughter:

It is 7 years ago today that the Lord welcomed my precious Logan into His presence. Can it really be? God has taught our family great lessons and continued to supply great comfort and hope in the midst of loss. We don't typically think that we can have "gain" in "loss", but God loves to flip our remedial thinking on its head. He gives hope in hopeless situations, turns mourning into dancing, uses weakness to show great strength, uses fools to shame the wise, reveals the great riches of his grace when we are poor in spirit, etc. ***I don't pretend to understand anything, except I'm confident in the Sovereign hand of My God that carries every burden and lifts us up to new heights even during journeys through deep valleys.*** Lord, thank you for caring more for Logan than I ever could. Thank you for walking with us every step. Thank you for allowing us to see You in new and amazing ways. You truly are an AWESOME GOD! Logan, I can't wait to be reunited with you one day and for you to show me around the streets of heaven. I'm overwhelmed that you have experienced 7 years of perfection! Wow! Happy "Perf-day" my sweet Logan. I love and miss you.

May we have the same response to the tension we face: a thoroughly Biblical, faith-driven, joyful, honest response to the most difficult questions of life.