

# Explore the Bible: Conquest

November 22, 2016

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 11 focuses Joshua 6:12-25.*

Perhaps the best way to approach this text is to admit our difficulty in understanding it, especially in light of the teachings of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

Yet, in this story, familiar to many from their early childhood, Joshua leads the people of God to destroy an entire city, Jericho, and slaughter all its inhabitants. While Jesus doesn’t contradict the Old Testament, he does claim that, in him, God’s people have a more complete revelation of the character of God than ever before.

## **Violence and religion**

In our day, various religions still claim God has commanded them to carry out acts of violence in God’s name. Christians don’t get a pass on this matter, as seen in the Crusades and up to and including the Civil War and beyond. People kill others in the name of God every day somewhere on this planet. Some argue, quite well, that religion has caused more war and death than any other force in history.

Violence certainly may accomplish our purposes more quickly than the way of love and compassion. God asks us to consider such matters from the perspective of God’s eternal purposes, not our most current desires.

So, the question becomes how this story from the Old Testament can instruct us to be more faithful followers of Christ. How can the same God who supposedly commanded his people to kill others who were also

the children of God also, in Christ, command us to reconsider a more compassionate way?

### **Jesus is the criterion for biblical interpretation**

If we are going to understand fully the progressive revelation of God in Scripture, we must interpret the Old Testament through the prism of the New Testament. More specifically, we should interpret all of Scripture, even the New Testament, through the teachings and works of our Savior, Jesus, who died once for all that all might live (1 Peter 3:18).

This progressive revelation of God, ultimately fulfilled in Christ, is the teaching of Scripture itself. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he also made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3-4).

That said, looking back on my childhood when I first heard this story in Sunday school, I do find a lesson. Now, it's my challenge to take that lesson, filter it through the teachings of Jesus, and see what I can find to apply to how I live in this moment.

### **God does the seemingly impossible through obedient people**

I have no memory of a Sunday school teacher ever instructing our young minds to consider violence as the way of God. What I do remember is this story was used to teach us what God can do through us when we are obedient.

This demands two disciplines of the modern reader of Scripture. One, we must leave Joshua's understanding of God to Joshua. His limited knowledge of God is perhaps a good starting point but not the end at which we should

arrive. We must not allow Joshua's experience with God to define ours since Christ has come. I personally cannot fathom the God I know through Christ ever instructing one of Jesus' followers to take up the sword to accomplish the will of God in this world.

On the other hand, I vividly remember sitting in Sunday school and being asked to ponder how it was that God could take the sounding of trumpets for six days straight, followed by a mighty shout, and bring down the walls of a great city. The story was used to encourage us to follow God's teachings in Christ, no matter how difficult, frightening or impossible they might seem.

The great boxer, Mohammed Ali, though a controversial character for many reasons, once said something worthy of consideration. He said something like, "If your dreams don't scare you, they aren't big enough."

Surely, conquering Jericho must have seemed impossible to some. Yet, God never asks us to do only what's possible but to strive to accomplish that which is possible only through obedient faith.

### **Nobody is beyond the grace of God**

Rahab, the harlot, also is a great example of this trusting faith. Some, perhaps, might write her off for her lifestyle. However, we don't know the whole story. Perhaps she was a widow and, as so often happened in those days, a widow had little choice but to sell her body to survive.

Nonetheless, this story teaches us that no one is beyond the grace of God. No one is beyond the blessing of God that comes only on the other side of obedience. The first chapter of Matthew's Gospel names Rahab as part of Jesus' family tree. There is no attempt to hide what is plain—that Jesus was born to common man, sins and all. God can use anyone to accomplish God's purposes.

It would not be a proper interpretation of this text to use it as justification to enlist violence to accomplish the will of God, especially not war. Yet, properly understood, it can always be a wonderful example of raw courage born of a deep and abiding faith in God.

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