

“There Has Been No Day Like It ”

The eighty-second in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 10:1-27; Revelation 6:1-17

From Christopher Hitchens to Richard Dawkins, any atheist worth their salt will appeal to God’s command to Israel to slaughter the Canaanites as the prime example of why they cannot believe that God exists. If God was truly good, they reason, he would never command such a horrible thing. But as we have seen during our study of the Book of Joshua, this is a false dilemma. Throughout the account of what is known as the Conquest—when Israel enters the promised land and defeats the Canaanite tribes living there—it has been clear that the inhabitants of Canaan knew full well that YHWH is the true and living God. They knew full well that the land of Canaan was YHWH’s to give to his people Israel, with whom he had made covenant. Repeatedly, we have seen how the Canaanites continued to reject YHWH and his promise to save all those who call upon his name. Instead, they chose to worship and serve false gods tied to the worship of the earth and its creatures. The Canaanites were given ample time to repent. Some did and were spared and even became partakers of Israel’s covenant with YHWH. And so when Joshua leads Israel to victory over the Canaanite tribes, wiping them out to the last man, God is warning the whole earth—including people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins—that his judgment is soon to come upon the whole earth.

As we continue our series on the Book of Joshua, we move into Joshua chapters 9-11, in which Joshua describes the changing military situation in Canaan. The increased resolve on the part of the Canaanites to oppose Israel is the consequence of Achan’s sin and Israel’s defeat at Ai. When tiny little Ai routed Joshua’s men, a number of Canaan tribes who had previously feared YHWH and his covenant people were watching. Five Canaanite tribes now decide to band together in opposition to Israel’s conquest of Canaan. The citizens of Shechem were simply absorbed into Israel—likely because of their ancient ties to Abraham and Jacob. The citizens of Gibeon were so afraid of YHWH and Israel’s army that went so far as to deceive Joshua and the leaders of Israel so that Israel would make a covenant with them. But in Joshua chapter 10 we read of five defiant Canaanite kings (called “Amorites”) who band together to attack Gibeon, because the Gibeonites made a treaty with Israel. The Gibeonite defection from their alliance with the other Canaanites tribes—who will not bow the knee to YHWH—cannot be tolerated.

The opening two verses of chapter 9 describe the changing military situation in Canaan in these terms. *“As soon as all the kings who were beyond the Jordan in the hill country and in the lowland all along the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, heard of this, they gathered together as one to fight against Joshua and Israel.”* As we saw last time, this alliance was the bitter fruit of Achan’s sin and God’s covenant curse upon Israel. The rest of Joshua 9:3-27 describes how the Gibeonites—one of Israel’s neighboring tribes—realized that their people (the Hivites) were about to be wiped out. Having heard of Israel’s decisive victories over the Amorite kings Sihon and Og, the Gibeonites lie about being Israel’s neighbors. They pretend to come from a distant land and then make a treaty with Joshua.

While God graciously forgave their deception, because they called upon the name of YHWH and acknowledged him as Lord and redeemer (just as the Canaanite prostitute Rahab had done), since their deception involved passing themselves off as servants, servants they will be. Because of the covenant made between Israel and Gibeon was binding, Joshua prevented the Israelites from wiping the Gibeonites out. Nevertheless, the Gibeonites will be servants in the house of the Lord, destined to carry water and

cut firewood. Better to be a servant in the house of the Lord, than to be wiped out and face God's wrath.

As we pick up with the account in Joshua 10 of what happens next, Israel will continue to honor the covenant they made with the Gibeonites, and despite the organized Canaanite opposition to the Israeli conquest, YHWH will be with Joshua, ensuring that the Israelites will be victorious.

In verses 1-2 of Joshua 10, we learn that *“As soon as Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem, heard how Joshua had captured Ai and had devoted it to destruction, doing to Ai and its king as he had done to Jericho and its king, and how the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and were among them, he feared greatly, because Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all its men were warriors.”* The men of Gibeon, who were great warriors (*gibboriym*), knew that YHWH was Israel's shield and defender. They heard the same news that the other Canaanite (Amorite) kings had heard. The Gibeonites called upon the name of the Lord, while the other Canaanite tribes thought that what the Gibeonites had done was an act of treason. Just as Israel's defeat at Ai empowered Canaanite resistance, the peace treaty made between Gibeon and Israel was a sign of Canaanite weakness. The Canaanites could not allow this alliance to stand. The king of Jerusalem decided to act.

Not only did the Canaanites lose some of their best fighters, but Gibeon's defection was the sure sign of impending defeat. In light of Gibeon's treaty with Israel, Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem (which by the way is the first time Jerusalem is mentioned by its current name) reasoned that the best way to defeat Israel was to attack Gibeon. This would put Israel and YHWH to the test. Would Israel fight to defend its new ally when the Israelites themselves had wanted to kill the Gibeonites because of their act of deception? Would YHWH actually fight for a Hivite tribe like the Gibeonites, who were destined for destruction? Such an attack by the five kings would also make Gibeon an example to all those other Canaanite tribes and cities who may have been considering defecting to the Israeli cause.

So, we read in verses 3-5, *“So Adoni-zedek king of Jerusalem sent to Hoham king of Hebron, to Piram king of Jarmuth, to Japhia king of Lachish, and to Debir king of Eglon, saying, ‘Come up to me and help me, and let us strike Gibeon. For it has made peace with Joshua and with the people of Israel.’ Then the five kings of the Amorites, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon, gathered their forces and went up with all their armies and encamped against Gibeon and made war against it.”* The coalition of five Amorite tribes now begins to take shape as Adoni-zedek, recruits Amorite soldiers from four other city/tribes. These five kings will form an alliance and together attack the Gibeonites. A combined Canaanite army soon marched on Gibeon and surrounded the city, laying siege.

That Adoni-zedek's plan put the new Israeli-Gibeonite peace treaty to the test becomes clear in verse 6. *“And the men of Gibeon sent to Joshua at the camp in Gilgal, saying, ‘Do not relax your hand from your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us and help us, for all the kings of the Amorites who dwell in the hill country are gathered against us.’”* When Joshua entered into a treaty with Gibeon, the Israelites pledged to defend Gibeon, even as the Gibeonites pledged their loyalty to YHWH and his covenant mediator, Joshua. When the Amorite coalition moves against Gibeon, the Gibeonites invoke their treaty with Israel with great urgency—the phrase “don't relax your hand means” something like “please don't abandon us!” In effect, the message to Israel from Gibeon is hhhheeeellllpppp!

Joshua will honor the covenant he made with Gibeon. *“So Joshua went up from Gilgal, he and all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valor.”* Not only does Joshua take immediate action to come to Gibeon's defense, it also becomes very clear that Joshua has the blessing of YHWH as he gets

the Israelite army ready to march. *“And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands. Not a man of them shall stand before you.’”* Let us not miss the significance of Joshua’s swift and determined action. All of Canaan is watching this play out. The Israelites have been prevented by Joshua from killing the Gibeonites because of this mutual defense treaty. Will the Israelites fight for their new servants, the Gibeonites? The five kings in coalition have brought a very strong army into battle. Is Joshua up to the challenge? Will the Israelites fight against such a formidable force, or will they run like they did at Ai? Meanwhile, the Gibeonites must be asking themselves, “did we do the right thing in making a treaty with Israel and YHWH?” Yes, everyone in Canaan was watching.

Joshua’s prowess as a military leader is apparent throughout chapters 10-11. We read in verse 9 that *“So Joshua came upon them [the five Amorite kings who marched against Gibeon] suddenly, having marched up all night from Gilgal.* Nothing is as important in battle as the element of surprise. Israel’s army—many thousands of *gibboryim*, valiant men—marched the more than twenty miles from Gilgal to Beth-horon, arriving when and where they were the least expected by the Amorites. This all-night march with a large army was quite a feat and demonstrates that Joshua had turned the rag-tag bunch who wandered through the Sinai wilderness into a formidable military force that can move on short notice, march all night, use the element of surprise and arrive on the field of battle ready to fight.

While Israel suffered an embarrassing defeat at Ai because of Achan’s sin, and the consequence of that sin was that many Canaanite tribes lost their fear of YHWH, nevertheless YHWH will not abandon his people nor renege on his covenant—even the covenant with the Gibeonites. That YHWH honors his covenant becomes clear in the military action which follows. The effect of Joshua’s night march is described in verses 10-11. *“And the LORD threw them into a panic before Israel, who struck them with a great blow at Gibeon and chased them by the way of the ascent of Beth-horon and struck them as far as Azekah and Makkedah. And as they fled before Israel, while they were going down the ascent of Beth-horon, the LORD threw down large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died. There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed with the sword.”*

When we read that “the Lord threw them” (the five Amorite kings), “into a panic,” we should notice that this has a two-fold reference. The first thing indicated by the passage is that the LORD was with Joshua in such a way that he blessed Joshua’s surprise attack. When the armies of Israel show up unexpectedly and in force, the Amorites obviously panicked at the sight of Joshua’s men where they had not expected them. Since the Lord works through means, this is, in part what caused the Amorite panic. Yet YHWH gets all the credit, giving Joshua wisdom and his men strength to fight the battle after marching all night. Joshua’s men totally defeated this Amorite coalition, driving them down the important trade route (the “way of ascent”) as far as Makkedah which is another twenty miles or so. No doubt, Joshua and the soldiers of Israel fought brilliantly and bravely. The Amorite army was in full retreat.

Joshua’s training of the army and his tactics are superb, but without YHWH’s blessing this victory would not have happened. YHWH also directly intervened, sending a powerful hailstorm which killed more Amorites than did the Israelite soldiers. The very fact that the Amorite armies fled so far so fast is indicative of the sheer panic that went through the ranks. Not only did the Israelite army outmaneuver the Amorite armies catching them by complete surprise, but a sudden hailstorm killed many, as soldiers caught out in the open facing gigantic hailstones would have no place to find shelter. This time it was the Amorites who broke and ran. After this amazing victory, no one in Canaan would remember Ai. It was clear to all that YHWH was on Israel’s side. While not yet complete, the victory was stunning. YHWH is the LORD. He is Israel’s shield and defender and gives his people the victory.

What follows is one of the most disputed passages in all the Bible. As we read in verses 12-14, *“At that time Joshua spoke to the LORD in the day when the LORD gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, ‘Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon.’ And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel.”*

The passage is controversial for several reasons. The first is that this passage raises the difficult question, “did the earth really stop rotating for a 24 hours?” Or, is Joshua speaking in a figurative manner? The second controversy has to do with the reference to the Book of Jashar. Let’s take up the second controversy first. The Book of Jashar is an extra-biblical writing and Joshua mentions it here in the sense of “if you don’t believe me, it is also written in the Book of Jashar.”¹ In other words, the account of Joshua asking the LORD for a sign which demonstrates his greatness and commemorates this victory of Israel over the Amorites is also found in an extra-biblical source, a second (and presumably impartial) witness. What is described here was so significant that it was recorded outside the Bible in a secular writing. Although the Book of Jashar is now lost to us, Joshua knew of it and appeals to it.

As for the main controversy, whatever we understand Joshua to mean in these verses, a couple of things are crystal clear. First, Joshua prayed for a dramatic sign and the LORD gave it to him. Boy, did he give him a dramatic sign! It was such a dramatic sign that Joshua can say that “there has never been a day like this before or after,” when the servant of the Lord prayed such a thing and it was answered. The second thing we must say is that the LORD supernaturally provided enough light (at night and in the day) that the Israelites were able march all night and to completely defeat their enemies before the next evening.

While I do not doubt for a second that God can stop the earth’s rotation and provide artificial gravity, I’m not sure that interpretation is necessarily required by the Hebrew text.² Joshua could be referring to the all-night march and the following day of battle in a figurative sense—remember, the reference is to both the sun and the moon giving enough light to ensure Israel’s victory. This would give the passage a similar sense to what we read in the Psalms—the rivers clap their hands and the mountains sing for joy. But more than likely—given the stress upon God’s supernatural intervention and the appeal to another source as proof that it happened (there had already been a horrific hailstorm)—Joshua is referring to a cosmic sign of some sort which was visible over the valley of Aijalon at night and which extended daylight over Gibeon long enough for Israel to win the battle. At the end of that day—and a long day that it was—it was clear to all the watching Canaanites that YHWH was fighting on the side of Israel. Joshua asked for a sign and YHWH responded by making it clear that he is LORD of the heavens and earth and Israel’s shield and defender. The final outcome of the battle was clear and so we read in verse 15 that *“So Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to the camp at Gilgal.”*

This brings us to the second part of the battle—the final conquest of the five kings—and this will take us to verse 28.

Having been completely routed, the Canaanite armies fled as far as Makkedah, many miles from the site

¹ Howard, *Joshua*, 249-250.

² See the helpful discussion of the various possibilities in: Howard, *Joshua*, 238-250.

of the original battle. Out of fear that of what happened to the kings of Jericho and Ai, the five kings went into hiding. According to the report in verses 16-17, *“these five kings fled and hid themselves in the cave at Makkedah. And it was told to Joshua, ‘The five kings have been found, hidden in the cave at Makkedah.’”* Upon hearing the news, Joshua gives the order to capture these men and finish off the remaining Amorite forces. *“And Joshua said, ‘Roll large stones against the mouth of the cave and set men by it to guard them, but do not stay there yourselves. Pursue your enemies; attack their rear guard. Do not let them enter their cities, for the Lord your God has given them into your hand.’”* While the kings are to be captured, there will be no mercy shown to the Amorite armies who are to be completely wiped out. The LORD has given Israel the victory. Only a few stragglers will survive and return home.

As we learn in verses 20-21, this is exactly what happened. *“When Joshua and the sons of Israel had finished striking them [the remnants of the combined Amorite army] with a great blow until they were wiped out, and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the fortified cities, then all the people returned safe to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah. Not a man moved his tongue against any of the people of Israel.”* God had given Israel such a decisive victory that not one of the Canaanites who managed to make it back to one of their fortified cities, dared speak a word of opposition against Israel. The Israelites returned to their camp, satisfied with their victory, and amazed at the power of God

Warfare during this period of time was a brutal business. A defeated army is to be wiped out, there was no such thing as surrender. Any survivors were humiliated and then enslaved. We see this in what follows. *“Then Joshua said, ‘Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me from the cave.’ And they did so, and brought those five kings out to him from the cave, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon.”* All five kings were captured alive. They would now face the consequences of their actions and their opposition to YHWH.

It should now be clear that the Gibeonites chose wisely, while those who followed Adoni-zedek did not. *“And when they brought those kings out to Joshua, Joshua summoned all the men of Israel and said to the chiefs of the men of war who had gone with him, ‘Come near; put your feet on the necks of these kings.’ Then they came near and put their feet on their necks.”* The placing of the foot on an opponent’s neck is the sign that the enemy has been completed and totally defeated. This is the ultimate humiliation. Amazingly, these words anticipate Paul’s in 1 Corinthians 15:25-27 where the apostle writes of Jesus, *“For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘all things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.”* This act of subjugation by Joshua when Israel defeats five Amorite kings, anticipates that day when Jesus comes back and does the same to all those who reject him. Without knowing it, Joshua is pointed his people ahead to Christ’s first and second advents.

Joshua knows that Israel’s victory and the dramatic sign from the LORD is an important lesson to all of Israel. *“And Joshua said to them, ‘Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous. For thus the Lord will do to all your enemies against whom you fight.’”* In this, Joshua reiterates to Israel the blessing-curse principle. He also metes out judgment upon Israel’s enemies. As we read in verses 26-27, *“And afterward Joshua struck them and put them to death, and he hanged them on five trees. And they hung on the trees until evening. But at the time of the going down of the sun, Joshua commanded, and they took them down from the trees and threw them into the cave where they had hidden themselves, and they set large stones against the mouth of the cave, which remain to this very day.”* As we will see in the coming weeks, it is not long before Joshua completes the conquest of the southern portion of Canaan, before heading to the north. The people of God will possess the land, as YHWH grants them the victory.

The brutality of the Israelite conquest of Canaan may trouble some among us, but in reality this is God's gracious warning to us, pointing us ahead to another conquest yet to come. If people like Hitchens and Dawkins don't like what Joshua did to the five kings and the Canaanites, then they won't be happy about what happens to unbelieving kings of the earth at the second coming.

The main point to take away from our text this morning is the fact that God always keeps his promises. He has promised to bless those who obey him and curse those who don't. In terms of God's covenant with Israel, his people did indeed follow his instructions mediated through Joshua. As a result of Israel's obedience to the terms of the Sinaitic covenant, God gave them a remarkable victory over five very fierce Canaanite tribes. YHWH even gave Joshua a miraculous sign by making the sun and moon stand still, or appear to stand still, in such a way as to give Israel enough light to be victorious. But for those in Canaan who knew full-well that YHWH was the living God and that this land was his to give to his people, their rejection of him resulted in their total defeat and humiliation. Indeed, the five kings who followed Adoni-zedek were forced to allow the men of Israel to place their feet upon their necks, before they were killed and then buried in the cave where they had hidden. These men heard the same news as did the Gibeonites. While the Gibeonites feared YHWH and then made a treaty with Israel, these five kings chose to oppose him. God made them a footstool for the feet of his people.

The good news for us is that through faith in Jesus Christ, God regards each one of us as though we had been perfectly obedient. Therefore, we are heirs according to the promise and therefore entitled to all of the blessings of God. Indeed on that great day when Jesus returns there will be blessing for us beyond measure. But this is not the case for those who know that God is creator and redeemer and who nevertheless reject him anyway, just as the Canaanites had done repeatedly. In fact, in our New Testament lesson, John is given a vision of that terrible day to come when Jesus (the greater Joshua) returns to judge the world and raise the dead.

What does John see in this vision? He sees something very much like we saw in Joshua 10 when the five kings hid in caves, fearing for their lives. After describing the first five seal judgments, says John about sixth seal, "When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" Frightening words.

Israel's invasion and conquest of Canaan secured the promised land for the people of God. The slaughter of the Canaanites was God's judgment upon a people who knew him, and who knew that they were squatters on his land. They were repeatedly given opportunities to repent. While the Gibeonites saw the light, Adoni-zedek refused. He organized an army to fight YHWH, and thereby marched to his humiliation and death. God gave Joshua (as well as all Israel and all the Canaanites) a sign that he was with his people. There was no day like it. But all that happened in Joshua 10 is in reality a dress-rehearsal, so to speak, for the last day, when the Lamb opens the sixth seal and the kings of the earth—who have rejected him and waged war upon his people—will once again seek to hide in caves. And once again, the greater Joshua will place his foot upon their necks, as he conquers our greatest enemy, which is death, and as he secures for us all the blessings of his covenant.