

07/03/22 Joshua 8:18-29
"The King and Ai"
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When July 4th comes around, I get especially **patriotic**. But as a pastor, I have to warn my egotistical heart that stamping God's imprimatur on my own political views is not my **calling** and that other fellow believers may think **differently** (even though they **are** wrong, and **I** am always **right!**). After all, even a Christian founder of our nation like **John Adams** joined the **Sons of Liberty**, and yet as a **lawyer**, he also successfully represented some **British** soldiers accused of murder in the Boston Massacre! There were Christian **revolutionaries** who fought for our new nation's freedom but also Christian **Tories** who thought King George had a **divine right** to rule them. In the **Viet Nam** War, I had Christian friends who truly believed we should stop another Southeast Asian **domino** from being toppled by brutal communists, while other Christian friends were protesting **against** involvement. But one thing on which we **ALL** could agree is that there's no place in war for any "slaughter of the innocents" like in 1770 Boston or in the 1968 My Lai massacre or in present day Ukraine as Putin's minions target artillery on children's hospitals and fleeing civilians. Thank God we don't have any of that going on in the Bible. Well, it **seems** we **DO...** like in this morning's O. T. reading from Joshua 8 about the divinely-sanctioned destruction of a town called **Ai** with its 12,000 men, women **and** children.

But before we go on, I'd like you to ruminate on this Biblical principle: If we acknowledge God's right to extend His amazing **GRACE** to people who **DON'T DESERVE** it, then we **ALSO** are required to acknowledge God's **right** to exercise His extreme **JUDGMENT** on obstinate sinners who totally **REJECT** it! To **DENY** that fact would be like God's **people** trying to play **God!**

Do you remember when **Pandora radio** came out a little over two decades ago? Before that, we could change the **channel** but not the **song**. But Pandora contained an **algorithm** that could remember and even **suggest** not only the different singers, bands or songs you **liked** but also pull them up whenever you **wanted!** To be honest, even God's chosen **people**, including we **preachers**, often seem to utilize a **similar** algorithm when dealing with the Bible. "*Well, the God of the Old Testament was **different** from the God of the New Testament.*" "*Well, you can't possibly take that **literally!***" *Well, that miracle couldn't **possibly** have happened, so I'm following Thomas Jefferson's example and making my own version of the Bible **without** any miracles in it.*" "*Well, that passage doesn't agree with my **woke worldview**, so I'm going to ignore it.*"

God's response to all that rationalizing nonsense is pretty clear in Isaiah 55:9, "*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are **My** ways higher than **your** ways and **My** thoughts than **your** thoughts.*" In other words, stop messin' with My inspired, inerrant, infallible Word and just **DEAL** with it!

And that's we're doing **this morning** as we tackle the shocking **slaughter** that transpires in **Joshua 8**. But first some historical **CONTEXT**, because as they say, a **TEXT** without its **CONTEXT** can be misused as a **PRETEXT**. (That's why you should

never take at face value what cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons have to say!)

You may recall back in **Joshua 6**, that God had sent the Israelites to conquer the pagan Land of Canaan promised to Abraham **hundreds** of years earlier, beginning with the complete destruction of the seemingly impregnable fortress city of **Jericho** by the Israelites simply marching around its massive walls and playing their ram's horn trumpets! Unlike subsequent conquests by the Israelites where they got to **keep** and **utilize** the spoils of war—such as animals and precious metals and other useful items—the divine directions for Jericho were to destroy even the animals and the entire pagan population, including men, women, & children (except Rahab & her family who had protected the two Israelite spies) and to take only the silver, gold, & bronze for the Israelite **treasury**, because God didn't want His chosen people to begin their conquest of the land by becoming fixated on accumulating "**stuff**" for themselves. Unlike subsequent conquests of subsequent pagan cities, Jericho was to be the **firstfruits offering** devoted to **God alone**. But unbeknownst to the rest of the Israelites, Achan had pilfered a beautiful Babylonian garment and some silver and gold and then buried beneath his booty under his **tent** but ironically couldn't enjoy or talk about lest he be found out! But God knew!

Meanwhile, the town of Ai (population 12,000) was next in line for destruction by Joshua & the Israelites felt like they now were "**on a roll**", so they didn't even bother to consult **GOD** before attacking it! Now, understand: they were aiming at a truly **spiritual objective**. God had **told** them to conquer the land. It's not that what they were doing was out of "the will of God". Rather, their folly was not consulting God **first**! It's possible for us to have true spiritual **objectives** but to go about them in the strength of our own **flesh** and fall prey to our own **overconfidence**, much like the Israelites did with the city of **Ai** the **FIRST** time.

So, Joshua only sent **3,000** soldiers to take the town...and the Israelites got the **TAR** beaten out of them! (Too bad Lincoln wasn't around back then to remind them of his wise words, "*My concern is not whether God is on **our** side; my greatest concern is to be on **God's** side, for God is always **right**.*" When Joshua prayed to God, He was told about the "**devoted things**" that were illicitly taken to the Israelite camp and what to do about. Achan **confessed**, and he and his whole family were stoned to death, his filthy lucre consumed by **fire**, and Joshua & the Israelites got a "**do over**".

But **NOW**, unlike the famous battle of **Jericho**, God would grant the Israelites no "ring-around-the-rosey", "bugle-blowing" miracle. Instead, God Himself gave Joshua a military **strategy** for the Israelites to follow to the letter, including a mandate to **utterly destroy Ai** and its **entire population** by taking 30,000 Israelite soldiers and dividing them into two groups—one in the **north** to draw Ai's soldiers out of the **town** and into **battle**, while the **rest** of the Israelites lay in ambush to the **west** of the city to then enter it and kill every man, woman, and child **in** it, **burn** it, and then join the **rest** of the Israelites to finish off the soldiers from Ai who already were in battle.

A few things are worth noting here. **First**, God had been **amazingly patient** with **Ai** up to this point. Let's just examine who these horrible people **WERE!** In **Genesis 15**, when God promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan, He surveys the land with Abraham and says, "In the **fourth generation**, your descendants are going to **return** here *"because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."* In other words, the level of sin and unrighteousness in the Amorites' **cup of iniquity** had been steadily filling for **generations**—some **400 years!** They had **seen** the witness of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had **heard** what God had done to the **Egyptians** when the Israelites came up out of Egypt. They had been reminded what the Israelites had done to the kings Sihon and Og. They had been shocked by the miraculous destruction at **Jericho**. I mean, **Ai** is **small**, but they had **spies**; **they** knew that God was bringing the Israelites into the land. Remember what Rahab said when the spies went into Jericho? She said, *"We have heard of your God and we have feared."* Rahab confessed to them that for **forty years** the people of Jericho had been fearing the day when the Israelites would cross the Jordan and their **promised land**. No doubt, the people of Ai knew it, **too!** They could have done what **Rahab** did. They could have aligned themselves with the Israelites and said, *"We want to worship your God. We want you to have mercy on us."* But they **didn't**. They set themselves **against** them. They did **NOT** repent, even though God had given them **400 years** to do so!

Not only did the people of Ai **not repent**, but do you know what their religious practices were **like?** Read all of the laws and commands that God gave His people in the Book of Deuteronomy. Why did God tell His people not to commit **bestiality**? Why did God command His people not only to refrain from committing **adultery**, but also **incest**? Why did God tell His people not to commit sexual acts with **children**, and not to sacrifice them in the **fire**? Because all those people **outside** of Israel were doing **ALL THOSE THINGS!** And so, God wanted the Israelites to show what **His holiness** looked like in contrast to the Amorites, the Canaanites, and all those pagan people that lived around them. God wanted them to see what **holiness** and **PURITY** was like. And God had been **gracious**. He allowed them—like in the days of Noah—**plenty** of time and space to repent. And yet, they **STILL** did not repent. So, the day came when God finally said, **"Time's up!"** And this situation generates several truths we should seriously consider before being tempted to question God's judgment.

First, we have to acknowledge that God is **greater** than we are. Because He **created** us, He has an absolute right **over** us. We cannot compare God's actions toward **humanity** to **our** actions toward one another. They're just not in the same category.

Second, God's **glory** is greater than anything. What God desires more than **anything** is His **glory**...even through a so-called "holy war". We need to acknowledge that God's **justice** and God's **mercy** can **both** bring Him glory. Even in Rev. 6:10 the souls of the martyrs cry out for God to exercise judgment: *"How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood on them who dwell on the earth?"*

Third, God has both the **right** and the **ability** to judge rebellious sinners, both **WITHIN** His camp and **OUTSIDE** of it...judging not just the **SIN** but also the **SINNERS**.

But **fourth**, we have neither the right **nor** the ability to **judge God**. Yet, when we look at a passage like this, we still **WANT** to, don't we? "**How can God be so cruel to all these people at Ai?**" Though the passage is utterly brutal, I think there's a clue in our text worth noting.

As Israel's armies surround the army of Ai and destroy everyone and everything in Ai, the Israelites keep the **King** of Ai **alive** and take him to **Joshua**. Why? Remember when Abraham rescued **Lot**, and the text described the battle of the **five kings** versus the **four kings**? Or remember in **Rev. 6** when the sixth seal is opened that it's the **kings** of the earth that run into the caves and cry for the mountains to fall on them? "**Kings**" represent their entire country and their people. Joshua **knows** that, so the **king of Ai** is brought to Joshua for a **special** punishment. Joshua also knew the command in Deut. 21, "*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a **tree***"...as the ultimate sign of disgrace by exposing a body for all to see. This king represented his people by **encouraging** their **bestiality**, their pagan pornographic **worship**, their sacrificing of children in the **fire**, and much worse. There was no punishment too **great** or curse too **awful** for **this** king, because he had **led** his people in these disgusting acts and bore the mark of the sins of **ALL** his people. So, Joshua takes him outside the city walls and **hangs him there on a tree** in defeat, disgrace and disgust.

Now, if you judge **God** for that act, you're going to have a real problem with something that happens 1,300 years **later**. You see, there is **another King** Who appears, and **His** people are every bit as wicked as the people of **Ai**. **His** people also are guilty of all kinds of atrocities and sins. **His** people deserve the same death the people of **Ai** received. Their cup of iniquity **also** is filled to the brim. Oh, you don't **THINK** so? You don't think, for example, the term "**slaughter of the innocents**" doesn't apply to a society where 63 million aborted human beings in the womb were deemed legally acceptable? This King's Name is **JESUS**, and He represents **ALL** the sins of **ALL** His people. One day, He also is taken outside the city walls, and He bears the sins of all those He represents by hanging on a **TREE**...a **CROSS**. God's judgment is poured out on **Him**. **HE** bears God's wrath **FOR** us. The same curse that Joshua inflicted on the king of **Ai** is applied to **Jesus**. But this King is **DIFFERENT**, because unlike the king of **Ai**, **THIS** King—though He represents all His **PEOPLE**, though He bears all their **SIN**—**this** King **NEVER** has sinned, let alone **encouraged** it! **This** King is **PERFECTLY HOLY**. Yet He takes their guilt and receives their punishment **willingly**. God's judgment is poured out on Him, and His people are allowed to **live**.

And you know **WHAT?** I actually find it much more difficult to understand why God allows the people of **KING JESUS** to **live**, than I do to understand why God allowed the people of **Ai** to **DIE**.

When you think about it, would it have mattered if the people of Ai had lived to be 80, 90, or 100 years old and had died a so-called "natural death"? Would their ultimate end have been less **worse**, less **troubling**? You see, the great tragedy is not the **means** of their death; the great tragedy is that they **deserved** to die and they **received** that death. But **King Jesus**...when **HE** died...He took our sins upon **Himself**, so that we **DON'T** have to die. God's **wrath** and God's **mercy** are both met **perfectly** in this **King on the**

cross Who did **NOT** deserve to die, though His people **DID** deserve eternal death!

Conclusion

The same God Who judges the people of **Ai** judges His **own Son** for the sins of His people, because a gospel with no **wrath** to deal with is no gospel at **ALL!** You cannot understand mercy and **grace** until first you understand that what you deserve is the judgment of **DEATH**. I don't really **NEED** Jesus to be my **buddy**, my **best friend**, and my **traveling companion** through life. What **I** need from Him—what we **ALL** need from Him, first and **foremost**—is for Him to be our **SAVIOR** and our **KING!**

In **His** Name, AMEN!

SERMON TEXT FOR THIS MORNING

Joshua 8:18-29

¹⁸ Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.” And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city. ¹⁹ And the men in the ambush rose quickly out of their place, and as soon as he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it. And they hurried to set the city on fire. ²⁰ So when the men of Ai looked back, behold, the smoke of the city went up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that, for the people who fled to the wilderness turned back against the pursuers. ²¹ And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had captured the city, and that the smoke of the city went up, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai. ²² And the others came out from the city against them, so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side. And Israel struck them down, until there was left none that survived or escaped. ²³ But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him near to Joshua. ²⁴ When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword. ²⁵ And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai. ²⁶ But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction. ²⁷ Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the Word of the Lord that He commanded Joshua. ²⁸ So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. ²⁹ And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.