

The Conquest of Canaan

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon explores the significance of Israel's conquest of Canaan, emphasizing obedience to God and the foreshadowing of ultimate rest in Christ.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:48, Deuteronomy 34:7, Joshua 3:10, Matthew 11:28, Romans 15:4, Galatians 3:7, Hebrews 4:5
Topics: "Obedience To God", "Promised Land"

Description

John Piper preaches on the conquest of Canaan, reflecting on Moses' final moments, the passing of leadership to Joshua, and the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River. He emphasizes the importance of obedience in fulfilling God's promises, using Achan's disobedience as an example. Piper delves into the significance of the conquest as a demonstration of God's holiness and faithfulness, pointing to a future perfect rest for God's people beyond the temporary rest in Canaan.

Transcript

November 29, 1981

THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN After wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, the people of Israel came finally to the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River opposite Jericho. And here one of the saddest scenes in all the Bible is described for us at the end of Deuteronomy. Moses was 120 years old, "his eye was not dim or his natural force abated" (Deut. 34:7), and he was profoundly loved by all the people. He had been their deliverer, their general, their lawgiver, their advocate before God, their prophet, their guide, their inspiration, their judge and their pastor for over 40 years. He was also a song writer (the closer you get to God the more impelled you feel to write songs!). In Deuteronomy 32, we read his last song:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as rain, my speech distil as the dew, as the gentle rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he.

And it goes on for 43 verses. It may not mean much when a young pastor says, "Ascribe greatness to our God. His work is perfect. All his ways are justice. He has shown himself faithful all my days." But when a 120 year-old veteran of faith sings his praises, the people listen.

But what gave that day its poignancy was what happened when the song was over. In Deuteronomy 32:48 we read:

The Lord said to Moses that very day, "Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho; and view the land of Canaan which I give to the people of Israel for a possession; and die on the mountain which you ascend, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor, and was gathered to his people; because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribath-Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin; because you did not revere me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel. For you shall see the land before you; but you shall not go there, into the land which I give to the people of Israel.

I see an old man with a straight back, a strong bronze face, clear eyes and snow white hair climbing Mount Nebo. And as he climbs, the camp of his beloved Israelites gets smaller and smaller on the east -and on the west beyond the Jordan, the promised land stretches out larger and larger. I see him atop the peak of Pisgah facing west all alone with God, at the end of one of the greatest ministries the world has ever known, the wind blowing his white hair and tears of regret flowing down his face. And I ask myself, "My God, how many conquests of joy have I forfeited through disobedience?"

The story is told in Numbers 20, how 40 years earlier God had said to Moses and Aaron, "Tell the rock before the people's eyes to yield its water; so you shall bring water out of the rock for them" (v. 8). But "Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice." And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (v. 12). And so Moses died there in the land of Moab according to the word of the Lord and the people wept for Moses 30 days.

And the mantle of leadership passed to Joshua, son of Nun, leader of Israel's military forces (Exodus 17:8) and Moses' personal assistant (Ex. 33:11; Joshua 1:1). The grief passes and the excitement starts to build: the Lord is about to fulfill his centuries-old promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a homeland in which to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness all their days (Luke 1:73-75). And just as God brought the people out of the land of bondage by dividing the Red Sea so he brings them into the land of promise by dividing the Jordan River. There were no armies chasing Israel this time as in Egypt. They could have built rafts or boats and taken their time, but God had three purposes to accomplish in dividing the Jordan River. First, to put his confirmation on Joshua as Moses' authorized successor. He says in Joshua 3:7, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you." Second, God aimed to strengthen the people's faith that he is with them and will give them victory in the battles ahead. Joshua 3:10, "Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites and the Jebusites." And the third purpose for bringing his people through the Jordan on dry ground was to melt the hearts of the enemies. Joshua 5:1, "When all the kings of the Canaanites that were by the sea heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their heart melted and there was no longer any spirit in them."

To make sure that the people saw this miracle as an act of their holy, lawgiving God of Sinai, the priests led the way into the river carrying the ark of the covenant and they stood in the middle of the river-bed with the ark of the covenant until all Israel was across. The ark of the covenant was the holiest piece of furniture from the tabernacle. It contained the two tablets of the covenant from Sinai and was the box

above which God met and talked to Moses. Therefore, as the Israelites walked by this ark in the midst of the Jordan with the waters piled up behind it, they were to think:

This is the God who gave us the law; this is what he can do for those who trust him and walk according to his commandments. How foolish we would be ever to break his covenant when by keeping it we can have this kind of power on our side.

Once on the other side of the Jordan, Israel camped at Gilgal. All the males who had been born since the exodus were circumcised in an act of national consecration to the Lord. Then the whole people celebrated the Passover and the next day the manna ceased and the people ate the fruit of the land (Joshua 5:2-12). We can imagine that the faint-hearted among the people could still say in the plains of Moab, "Well we can still go back to Egypt if things don't work out." But not any more. The Jordan has closed behind them; the manna has ceased; and before them lies Jericho. The only choices now are conquer according to the word of the Lord or be annihilated as a people. That's a good position to be in. It simply helps you see more clearly what is always at stake in obeying or disobeying God.

The story of the conquest is told in the book of Joshua. It can be summed up like this. Jericho falls in chapter 6. Then after a brief setback due to the disobedience of Achan, in chapter 7 Ai is captured. Then with Gilgal as the base, Joshua subdues all the southern part of Canaan in Joshua 9-10, and all the northern part in Joshua 11. In chapters 13-21, the land is parceled out to the tribes of Israel. The climax comes in Josh. 21:43 with these words:

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the Land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

The book of Joshua ends on a triumphant note. But there are premonitions of trouble ahead because, even though all the nations had been subdued, and Israel enjoyed rest there were remnants of the godless nations still in Canaan and Joshua had to warn the people before he died, "Take good heed to yourselves, therefore, to love the Lord your God. For if you turn back and join the remnant of these nations left here among you ... know assuredly that God will not continue to drive out these nations before you" (Josh. 23:11-13).

When the book of Judges opens we sense immediately a different atmosphere and we brace ourselves for the worst. Joshua dies and Judges 2:10 tells us ominously, "And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel. And the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals."

I can't help but pause here to apply this tragic word to us parents. How did a generation arise in Israel who did not know the work that the Lord had done for Israel? It could only have happened because fathers and mothers ignored the teaching of Moses (Deut. 6:7;11:19) and neglected to speak to their children of the mighty deeds of God "when they sat in their house and when they walked in the way, when they lay down and when they rose up." Parents (and here I admonish myself most of all, because my schedule is a terrible threat to obedience on this point) hear the word of the Lord:

God established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. (Psalm 78:5-7)

Parents, do you spend 10 or 15 minutes a day with your children rehearsing the great things God has done for his people and drawing out lessons for life. Do you have a big fat Bible storybook (like the old Hurlbut's) that boils the stories down to their most essential and exacting points. We must remember this, no matter how many conquests of faith we may be enjoying, if we aren't teaching our children the great deeds of the Lord and the great doctrines of the faith, we are preparing them to serve the Baals. And the Lord will hold me accountable for that - not Dan or Shirley or Velma or Sandy or Joan or Judy or Tom or Carl or any other teacher of my sons. I am their father by divine appointment, and therefore together with Noel, I am responsible to see to it that they do not forget the Lord or the great works he has done for his people throughout redemptive history. One of my hopes in this series on redemptive history is that you all might be stimulated to dig into God's word for yourself and for your children.

Now let's look back over this great event of redemptive history, the conquest of Canaan and try to answer some troubling questions that I hope will lead us deeper into God's purposes and lessons for us. The first question is this: How can this unprovoked aggression of a foreign power against the Canaanites be justified even to the point where it is a cause for worshipping God? If a nation did today what Israel did in the conquest of Canaan we would oppose it with all our might. The answer I think has three parts. First, the period of redemptive history from the Exodus to the incarnation, from Moses to Jesus, is unique. In this period God's will was that his people have a national form with a land. He willed that it be a political body and not just a religious one. In this way, God typified that the land is his and foreshadowed that one day his people will inherit the whole earth. And by giving his people the form of a nation for a span of history, God secured for them a prominence which guaranteed that the lessons he wanted to teach through them would be known to all the world. Before Moses and after Jesus this was not so. Abraham and his descendants were sojourners and exiles and had no political national identity. And since Christ the Church is the people of God, the true Israel, and it has no national form, but it too, like Abraham, is described as a people of sojourners, exiles and aliens (1 Peter 1:1,17;2:11; Heb. 11:13-16;13:14). Therefore, no nation today may claim to be the people of God as Israel was and presume to execute God's historical judgments.

The second part of the answer is that, as the unique people of God, the exploits of Israel were not her own doing but God's. God was her commander-in-chief. He gave all the orders and he himself fought for them (Josh. 6:16;11:20; 23:10). When they acted against his orders they were defeated (Num. 14:39-45; Josh. 7:1-5). Therefore, we must conceive of Israel as the weapon of the Lord, the instrument by which he accomplished his historical judgments on the nations.

That leads to the third part of the answer, namely, that the destruction of the nations of Canaan was not just to make a place for Israel; it was a judgment on the wickedness of those nations. Moses warned Israel in Deut. 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 the Lord your God is driving them out from before you and that he may confirm the word which he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Therefore, I think if we keep these three things in mind we can view the conquest of Canaan as a great demonstration of God's holiness and faithfulness: first, in the period from Moses to Jesus the people of God are a national, political body as well as a religious one; second, God is the one fighting through Israel; the conquest is not merely a human act of aggression; third, the conquest is a divine judgment on the idolatry and wickedness of the nations of Canaan.

The second question to be raised is whether the conquest of Canaan depended on Israel's obedience or not. This question is closely related to the question as to whether the Abrahamic covenant was conditional, since that covenant included the promise of the land and the conquest is described (in Deut. 9:5) as a fulfillment of that covenant. On the one hand Moses says, "Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land" (Deut. 9:5). On the other hand Moses says, "You shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may go well with you, and that you may go in and take possession of the good land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers" (Deut. 6:18). Similarly God says to Joshua, "Be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go" (Josh. 1:7).

The way these texts fit together seems to be something like this: there will be no conquest without obedience. God will not fight for a people who are fighting against him. In order to succeed, Joshua and the people must be courageous in God and obey his commandments. But when this happens and the conquest is successful the people may not boast and say, "It was because of my righteousness that God drove out the nations." For God had seen the wickedness of those nations and purposed to destroy them, and he had made the promise to Abraham and purposed to fulfill it, long before there was any righteousness in Joshua and in the people he led over. The conquest of Canaan was decreed prior to any righteousness in Israel. It was part of the certain promises to Abraham. No generation of Israel could presume that it was the one appointed for the conquest. If any generation in Israel had tried to say it was God, could have simply said, "You shall die in the wilderness and I will raise up another generation until there is a people who will rely on my mercy and my sovereign power rather than on their own merit."

So it seems that there is a sense in which the obedience of Israel is the condition of the conquest and a sense in which it is not. It is not in the sense that the conquest is already decreed and certain as part of the Abrahamic covenant. So no one's obedience moved God to do this thing. But the obedience of Israel is the condition of the conquest in the sense that who participates in this mercifully decreed event depends on who is courageous in faith and obedience. Had Joshua and his people's here failed, they would have been rejected and God would have started over with a new generation.

Achan's disobedience in Joshua 7 is an illustration of how the obedience of faith was a condition of a successful conquest. Israel was defeated at Ai because Achan disobeyed the command to destroy everything. He said, "When I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, I coveted them and took them" (Josh. 7:21). In other words, Achan stopped trusting that God's way was best and most rewarding, and so his desire for the happiness he could achieve with gold and silver became stronger than his desire to follow God and obey his commandments. This attitude of covetousness so dishonored God that he refused to fight for Israel until things were rectified. Therefore, the condition of a successful conquest was faith in the wisdom and love and power of the divine Commander-in-Chief. This faith obviously leads to following his divine commands, and so the obedience of faith is the condition of a successful conquest. This kind of conditionality is what we say in the covenant with Abraham and it is what we see in the new covenant as well.

A final question to ask about Israel's conquest of Canaan is how it may point to the future. Here we are not left to ourselves, because the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament has already seen some very profound things. Without reading all of Hebrews 4, let me try to do for you what he does for his readers. First of all, he notices in Josh. 21:44 and 23:1 that "the Lord gave rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers." Rest, peaceful satisfying freedom from assault, was part of the OT hope. And here it was at last. And yet, the writer to the Hebrews saw also that this rest was imperfect and short-lived. Enemies lurked in the land and soon the people were led into idolatry. This is hardly the grand and final fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Therefore, the mighty acts of God which brought Israel this far are a partial fulfillment of the promise, but at the very same time, point beyond this rest to another perfect rest which yet remains for God's people. The conquest of Canaan becomes a type, a foreshadow of something greater yet to come.

The writer to the Hebrews finds a confirmation of this hope in Ps. 95:7-11. He sees in verse 7 the plea, "O that today you would hearken to God's voice!" Don't be like the unbelieving generation who died in the wilderness, to whom the Lord swore that they would never enter his rest (Ps. 95:11). But catch what this implies. If the psalmist says, "Don't be like those who were excluded from God's rest," but "Today, hearken to his voice and harden not your heart," then this implies that God's rest even after several hundred years is still open and available to those who hear with faith. When the writer to the Hebrews sees this and adds to it that no experience of Israel from David's time to the present could be equated with the promised rest of God, he concludes that therefore the rest, promised to Abraham and tasted after the conquest of Canaan, is still available to those who have the obedience of faith. Here is the way he says it in Hebrews 4:5-11:

And again in this place God said, "They shall never enter my rest," Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news, failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest God would not speak later of another day. So then there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God ... Let us therefore, strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience.

And now remember, "It is people of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). "If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). So the promise is for you, "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy- laden and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28) a foretaste "today" in the peace that passes understanding, and then in the age to come perfect rest in a new heaven and a new earth, a promised land utterly free from enemies and from sin and from pain and fear and guilt and crying.

And of this we may be sure: if the old Joshua was victorious over the enemies of God, then how much more then new Joshua (Joshua and Jesus are the same name, you know). Everything about the conquest of Canaan was written for our sake in order that we might have hope (Rom. 15:4). In all those things we see reflected dimly the conquest of Jesus over Satan and sin and death and hell. With the blow that was struck at Calvary, we know the victory is ours. Therefore, "let us strive to enter that rest that none of us fall by the same sort of disobedience." For if we hold our first confidence firm to the end, the deep river of death will open before us and Jesus will carry us over on dry ground to the land where all is peace.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net