

"HOLY WAR IN CONTEXT"

I. Introduction

- A. There is considerable confusion these days about what we should do with passages like this.
1. As Michael Horton says in his recently published systematic theology, "In an era of religious terrorism, many people — including theologians and ministers — argue that the Old Testament's 'texts of terror' must simply be repudiated. On the other hand, some appeal to these texts as if they were still in force and could be invoked for their own national, moral, or political causes." [*The Christian Faith*, 957]
 2. These erroneous perspectives are caused by a failure to understand the holy war theme in the overall context of Scripture.
 3. This theme is woven all throughout the Bible, so it is not something that we can ignore.
 4. Holy war is a key element in the outworking of God's plan of redemption, and our understanding of that plan will not be accurate if we do not see how this theme fits into the big picture.
- B. One thing that is important to understand from the outset is that Old Testament holy war was not a matter of genocide.
1. The Israelites were not wiping out a people on the basis of race or ethnicity.
 2. Instead, God used Israel as the instrument through which he brought his judgment upon an extremely wicked people.
 3. It is also important to understand that Old Testament holy war was carried out in a unique era in redemptive history and pointed to a reality that will be culminated on the day of judgment.

4. As we study this text today, we will consider these words about the conquest of Canaan in light of the grand redemptive drama that unfolds across the pages of Scripture.
5. By approaching this passage in this way, we will see that it points us to Christ and to the salvation that he has secured for all who look to him in faith.

II. Christ Our Forerunner (vv. 20-26)

- A. We begin by looking at verses 20 through 26, which points us to Christ as our forerunner.
 1. God says that he sends an angel before his people to guard them on the way and to bring them to the place that he has prepared.
 2. When we hear the word “angel”, we immediately think of angelic beings.
 3. While the Scriptures certainly do speak of such beings elsewhere, this is probably not what is meant by the term “angel” here.
 4. Recall how the word was used back in chapter 3.
 5. Exodus 3:2 said that the “angel of the LORD” appeared to Moses in the burning bush, but Exodus 3:4 said that it was God who called out to Moses from the bush.
 6. We see something similar in Genesis 48, where Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh by saying this: “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys” (vv. 15–16)
 7. Jacob refers both to God and to the angel as the source of this blessing.
 8. In these and other Old Testament passages, the angel of the Lord is identified with the Lord himself.

- B. The way to make sense of such passages is to understand that the Hebrew word “angel” simply means messenger.
1. While it can refer the created beings that we typically think of when we speak of angels, the word can also be used in other senses.
 2. In some passages, the angel of the LORD is the agent through whom God mediates his presence to his people.
 3. This appears to be the case here in our text, because God says that his name is in this angel.
 4. This angelic mediator is simultaneously distinguished from God and identified as God.
 5. The only person who fits such a description is Jesus Christ, the one true mediator between God and man.
 6. In light of this, it makes good sense to conclude that this angel of the LORD is a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.
- C. The connection with Jesus becomes even more clear when we consider the terminology that our text uses to describe what this angel does.
1. The angel goes before God’s people to bring them to the place that God has prepared.
 2. This bears a striking similarity to what Jesus said in his Farewell Discourse in John 14 as he prepared his disciples for his departure.
 3. Jesus told them, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (vv. 1-3)

4. That passage from John and our text in Exodus both focus upon something that is at the very heart of God's plan of redemption.
 5. God's purpose is to make a people for himself and to bring us to the place where he will dwell in our midst.
 6. In the Old Testament, the land of Palestine was a symbolic foreshadowing of the heavenly dwelling place where the redeemed will enjoy eternal communion with the Lord.
 7. Jesus left this world in order to prepare that place for us.
 8. He prepared it by his death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession on our behalf.
 9. This is why the writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus has gone into the heavenly sanctuary as our forerunner.
 10. He has done all that he has done in order to prepare a place for us in heaven, which means we can be confident that he will return again at the end of the age to take us to that place.
- D. Another point that is strongly emphasized in this first part of our text is the importance of listening to God's angel and obeying his voice.
1. The Lord issues a stern warning, saying, "do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him."
 2. This warning raises a serious question.
 3. If God's name is in this angel, if the angel is none other than the pre-incarnate Christ, then how can God say that the angel will not pardon transgression?
 4. God's very nature is one of mercy and forgiveness.
 5. This is made clear in Exodus 34, where the Lord is described as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for

thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (vv. 6-7).

6. If God will not forgive our transgressions, then we have no hope.
 7. Yet that is what the Lord says about this angelic mediator.
 8. He will not tolerate any rebellion against his leadership.
- E. The key to making sense of this is to remember that this passage is part of the Sinai covenant.
1. The blessings that were promised in the Sinai covenant were conditional blessings.
 2. They depended on the people's covenant faithfulness.
 3. We saw this back in chapter 19, where the Lord told his people, "if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (vv. 5-6)
 4. We see the same thing in this passage, where God promises to provide his people with ample food and water and to keep them from sickness and miscarriage and barrenness if they remain faithful to him.
 5. Conversely, if they are unfaithful to the covenant, they will bring the curses of the covenant upon themselves.
 6. This helps us to understand why the sin of the wilderness generation and the sin of Moses disqualified them from entering the Promised Land.
 7. This does not mean that Moses or all of the Israelites who rebelled in the wilderness were barred from heaven.

8. It simply means that under the terms of the Sinai covenant, they were covenant breakers.
9. They could not receive the blessings of the Sinai covenant because they had failed to fulfill the conditions of that covenant.
10. In time, the same thing would prove to be true of all of the people of Israel, and this resulted in their eventual exile from the land.
11. As a conditional covenant, the Sinai covenant demonstrated that it is impossible for us to inherit God's blessing on the basis of our performance.
12. For believing Israelites, salvation did not come by looking to the commitment that they had made at Sinai.
13. It came by looking to the unconditional promise that God had given to Abraham.
14. As Paul explains in his letter to the Galatians, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who is hanged on a tree' — so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Gal. 3:10, 13-14)
15. This assures us that if we have Jesus as our forerunner, we will inherit God's promise of redemption.

III. Christ Our Captain (vv. 27-33)

- A. We turn now to the second part of our passage, verses 27 through 33, which points to how Christ is our captain in the great battle that is being waged in this present age.
 1. Not only will God send his angel before his people, he will also send his terror before them so that their enemies will be utterly

routed.

2. Before Israel could be brought into the Promised Land, that land had to be purged of its wicked inhabitants.
 3. And make no mistake, the Canaanites and their neighbors were a very wicked people.
 4. They even engaged in the practice of child-sacrifice.
 5. God told Abraham back in Genesis 15 that Abraham's offspring could not receive their inheritance in Canaan until the iniquities of the Amorites was complete.
 6. Here in Exodus 23, it is clear that that day had finally come, and God was going to use Israel as his instrument to bring judgment upon the various groups who called Canaan their home.
- B. As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, it is vital that we understand the theme of holy war in the context of the plotline of the entire Bible.
1. The reason why God commanded Israel to conduct holy war in Canaan was because Israel was his covenant community, ordained as a theocratic institution.
 2. Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline helpfully explained holy war by employing the concept of "intrusion ethics."
 3. This concept says that when God set Israel up as a covenant nation, he was causing his kingdom to descend to earth.
 4. Because of this, the ethical sanctions of God's heavenly kingdom were immediately and directly carried out by God himself in Israel.
 5. This explains why so many crimes were punishable by the death penalty in Old Testament Israel.

6. In a shadowy sense, the Sinai covenant caused God's future kingdom and its ethical principles to be drawn into the present age.
 7. This means Old Testament holy war was a matter of realized eschatology.
 8. It was a foreshadowing of the judgment that will one day fall upon everyone who has no share in the redemption purchased by Christ.
- C. The entire Bible contains the plotline of holy war.
1. We see it all the way back in Genesis 3:15, where God says that there will be perpetual warfare between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.
 2. The seed of the woman are those who belong to the line of promise.
 3. They are those whom God, in his grace, has elected to salvation.
 4. The seed of the serpent are those whom God has passed over and left in their sin.
 5. They are those who belong to the domain of darkness.
 6. The seed of the serpent are reprobate, but they are also the recipients of God's common grace for as long as they remain in this world.
 7. We see this with Cain and Ishmael in the book of Genesis.
 8. Even though they were not a part of the covenant people, God preserved their physical lives and bestowed temporal blessings upon them.
 9. As long as God continues to uphold this world in its fallen condition, he will continue to extend his common grace to all people.

10. And this means there will always be conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.
- D. It is clear in this passage that God will be the agent who effects the expulsion of the Canaanites from the land.
1. God says, "I will send my terror before you", "I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you", "I will send hornets before you", "I will drive them out", and "I will give them into your hand."
 2. While Israel is the Lord's instrument, this is by no means a joint effort.
 3. It is accomplished entirely by God's power.
 4. This is a picture how God's kingdom comes.
 5. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, the kingdom is not something that we are building but something that we are receiving. (see Heb. 12:28)
- E. We should also note the manner in which God will drive out the inhabitants of the land.
1. He says that he will drive them out gradually, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts overrun it.
 2. God is driving out the Canaanites so that the Israelites can fill the land and subdue it.
 3. He is bringing them into a new Eden, and the task that was first given to Adam and Eve is now going to fall upon their shoulders.
- F. The most important aspect of this commission was that the Israelites were not to worship any other gods.
1. God knew that his people would be tempted to engage in idolatry.

2. The thing that made idolatry so attractive in the ancient world was how it made religion so relevant to everyday life.
 3. As one commentator explains, "The ancient farmer thought that the gods were absolutely essential to the agricultural process and that the way to involve the goodwill of the gods on behalf of one's farming was to worship them. The essence of worship was providing food for them in the form of sacrifices." [Stuart, 545]
 4. This was the point of the various fertility cults in Canaanite religion.
 5. It was essentially a version of what has come to be described in our day as the 'prosperity gospel.'
 6. Such a pragmatic approach to religion led ancient people to be very open to worshipping multiple gods in hopes of benefitting from their special areas of control.
 7. As Jewish scholar Jon Levenson notes, "the other cultures of the biblical world were, by comparison to Israel, remarkably tolerant... Their pantheons absorbed gods with ease." [cited in Horton, 968]
 8. Nevertheless, the Lord insisted that his people worship him alone.
 9. They were not to allow the apparent relevance and pragmatic benefits of idolatry to be a snare to them.
 10. They were not even to allow any of the Canaanites to remain in the land, lest they be a snare to them.
- G. In addition to prohibiting the Israelites from serving other gods, the Lord also forbade them from entering into covenants or treaties with the people of Canaan.
1. One thing that is interesting about this prohibition is that it was not in effect in earlier eras.

2. While God always prohibits his people from worshipping other gods and from intermarrying with those who do not worship the one true God, this is not the case when it comes to entering into political treaties or covenants with other peoples.
3. In the book of Genesis, the patriarchs entered into numerous covenants with their Canaanite neighbors, and there is no indication that they were wrong to do so.
4. Meredith Kline draws two helpful conclusions from this, saying, "This tells us two things. One is that the divine institutional norms which govern the functioning of a theocracy are not meant for general application apart from that institutional framework. The second is that the covenant institution in the patriarchal age was nontheocratic." [*Kingdom Prologue*, 358]
5. In other words, special rules applied when God constituted Israel as a theocracy at Sinai.
6. It was a unique arrangement in the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption.
7. As we have already said, this point is vital to grasp if we are going to have a proper understanding of the Bible's theme of holy war.

IV. Conclusion

- A. As we think about how this passage relates to us today, we need to understand where we stand in relation to the biblical drama of redemption.
 1. The kingdom of God has come, but at present it is being manifested as a kingdom of grace.
 2. At Christ's return, this kingdom will be manifested as a kingdom of glory, and final justice will be established throughout the earth.
 3. But until that day arrives, God is not wiping out his enemies but is instead extending them the offer of peace through the proclamation

of the gospel.

4. The church is Christ's embassy of peace to the world.
- B. At the same time, we are still engaged in the great spiritual conflict.
1. The key difference is that the weapons of our warfare are not the same as the ones that were used in the era of the theocracy.
 2. As Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 10, "though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5)
 3. This is not just optimistic rhetoric.
 4. It is a reality in which we are participating.
 5. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered, and by his blood he ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.
 6. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!
 7. May his name be exalted in our lives, and to the ends of the earth!