

**“The Conquest Begins”**  
**Deuteronomy 2:24-3:11**  
**October 10, 2021**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

We continue this morning with our fall series in the book of Deuteronomy, with Moses preaching to the second exodus generation of Israel, on the edge of the promised land.

Today we come to Deuteronomy 2:24-3:11.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses said:

<sup>2:17</sup> Yahweh said to me, [...]

<sup>24</sup> ‘Rise up, set out on your journey and go over the Valley of the Arnon. Behold, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to take possession, and contend with him in battle. <sup>25</sup> This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you.’

<sup>26</sup> “So I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemoth to Sihon the king of Heshbon, with words of peace, saying, <sup>27</sup> ‘Let me pass through your land. I will go only by the road; I will turn aside neither to the right nor to the left. <sup>28</sup> You shall sell me food for money, that I may eat, and give me water for money, that I may drink. Only let me pass through on foot, <sup>29</sup> as the sons of Esau who live in Seir and the Moabites who live in Ar did for me, until I go over the Jordan into the land that Yahweh our God is giving to us.’ <sup>30</sup> But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for Yahweh your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day. <sup>31</sup> And Yahweh said to me, ‘Behold, I have begun to give Sihon and his land over to you. Begin to take possession, that you may occupy his land.’ <sup>32</sup> Then Sihon came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Jahaz. <sup>33</sup> And Yahweh our God gave him over to us, and we defeated him and his sons and all his people. <sup>34</sup> And we captured all his cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children. We left no survivors. <sup>35</sup> Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves, with the plunder of the cities that we captured. <sup>36</sup> From Aroer, which is on the edge of the Valley of the Arnon, and from the city that is in the valley, as far as Gilead, there was not a city too high for us. Yahweh our God gave all into our hands. <sup>37</sup> Only to the land of the sons of Ammon you did not draw near, that is, to all the banks of the river Jabbok and the cities of the hill country, whatever Yahweh our God had forbidden us.

<sup>3:1</sup> “Then we turned and went up the way to Bashan. And Og the king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. <sup>2</sup> But Yahweh said to me, ‘Do not fear him, for I have given him and all his people and his land into your hand. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.’ <sup>3</sup> So Yahweh our God gave into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan, and all his people, and we struck him down until he had no survivor left. <sup>4</sup> And we took all his cities at that time—there was not a city that we did not take from them—sixty cities, the whole region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. <sup>5</sup> All these were cities fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides very many unwalled villages. <sup>6</sup> And we devoted them to destruction, as we did to Sihon the king of Heshbon, devoting to destruction every city, men, women, and children. <sup>7</sup> But all the livestock and the spoil of the cities we took as our plunder. <sup>8</sup> So we took the land at that time out of the hand of the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon <sup>9</sup> (the Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir), <sup>10</sup> all the cities of the tableland and all Gilead and all Bashan, as far as Salecah and Edrei, cities of the kingdom of Og in Bashan. <sup>11</sup> (For only Og the king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold, his bed was a bed of iron. Is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits was its length, and four cubits its breadth, according to the common cubit.)

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, your hands have made and fashioned us;  
give us understanding that we may learn your commandments,  
that we your people might rejoice together,  
as we see the work that you are doing in each of us.  
Let your steadfast love comfort us,  
according to your promises.  
Work now in our hearts, to conform them to your word,  
that we may not be put to shame,  
but might delight in you.  
Teach us from your word now, we ask,  
in Jesus’s name. Amen  
[Based on Psalm 119:73, 74, 76, 80]

## **Introduction**

There are a few things going on in our text today, but this morning our focus will be on the destruction that Israel brought on Heshbon and Bashan.

When it speaks of the battle with Heshbon, we read of Israel’s actions in verse thirty-four: “And we captured all his cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children. We left no survivors.”

Then, when we read of Bashan, we read in verse three:

“So Yahweh our God gave into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan, and all his people, and we struck him down until he had no survivor left.”

And then in verse six: “And we devoted them to destruction, as we did to Sihon the king of Heshbon, devoting to destruction every city, men, women, and children.”

These kinds of texts leave us with a lot of questions. And those questions only increase when we recognize that the destruction described here was ordered by God. We read this, for example, in Deuteronomy twenty, where God, through Moses, is speaking of the promised land he is giving to Israel, and he says to them: “But in the cities of these peoples that Yahweh your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as Yahweh your God has commanded” [Deuteronomy 20:16-17]

This is the kind of warfare that God called Israel to concerning the people in the promised land. And Heshbon and Bashan, while east of the Jordan, is in many ways considered the beginning of the conquest of the promised land. [See Joshua 12; Barker, 334].

God has called for, as we read it, that the people of the land be “devoted to destruction.” What are we to make of that?

I want to consider four aspects of that this morning: I want to consider first, what its historical and moral meaning is, second what it tells us about the justice of God, third how it fits into the saving mission of God, and fourth what we learn here about sin and salvation.

### **The Historical & Moral Meaning**

So first, what is the historical and moral meaning of this text? What really happened in the days of Moses, and what does it mean for how we treat others today?

There are often two groups of people who especially need to spend time in these questions. One group are those who are deeply disturbed by these texts. They wonder if these texts mean that the God of the Bible is as cruel and blood thirsty as the god of the terrorists we so often read of and recoil from. They fear that this is evidence that the Bible really does support religious violence. They worry about what this means for God, and those who follow him.

Others who need to spend time with this question are those who get overly enthusiastic about these texts. And it's not that they are looking for physical violence against others, but they are more drawn to the idea that these texts give them permission to verbally or socially attack other people. The idea that normal ethical rules for conflict might not apply when it comes to their speech or attitudes towards hostile non-believers, is an exciting prospect to them. And these sorts of texts can seem like obvious support for such an idea.

Both ends of that – both extremes – misunderstand the text. To see that – to better understand what this text means for us – we first need to get a better understanding of what it meant for them – for Israel under Moses and then Joshua.

This morning I am especially drawing from a few books. One is Paul Copan's book *Is God a Moral Monster?* Another is Christopher Wright's book *The God I Don't Understand* [TGIDU in citations below]. There are other books out there as well, and, in fact I have been frustrated that I didn't have even more time to dig deeper into those books, but Copan and Wright provide a good starting point.

With that said, there are five aspects of the kind of warfare described here that help us better understand what the words written here meant for them, and therefore what they mean for us. [From Copan 158-208; Wright, *TGIDU*, 87-91]

First, the call to wage war with the goal of total destruction, signified by the Hebrew word *herem*, was limited to a specific period of redemptive history. It is only invoked in relation to the conquest of Canaan. It's important to remember that while the *substance* of God's work and the covenant of grace is consistent throughout the history of God's work in the world, we see also in the Bible that some elements and means of how God works from one period of redemptive history to another can vary quite a bit. At one point God used a worldwide flood, but he does not plan to do that again. At one point he called his people to slaughter animals in their worship, but that command has ceased. And at one point God called his people to execute *herem* warfare on those he had passed judgment on. But he does not call for or allow that for his people in general. So to begin, we need to recognize that whatever we see about *herem* warfare in the days of Moses and Joshua, we need to be very careful about what conclusions we draw for what it means for other times.

Second, *herem* warfare was limited to a specific people. Israel was not normally to wage *herem*-style war – this war where people and things were called on to be devoted to destruction. It was not the typical way Israel waged war. It was an approach that was only permitted against enemies of God's people whom God specified. Different rules applied to the more conventional wars Israel engaged in throughout its history, and that distinction is made in the Old Testament itself.

Third, the method of *herem*-style warfare was limited to direct divine decision and commands from God, and was in effect an act of God. No human was ever allowed to make the decision that Israel would carry out a *herem* form of attack. Only God was able to make that call, and in those instances, it was considered God himself who was bringing judgment on a people. Israel was considered to merely be God's instrument.

Fourth, *herem* warfare was typically directed at military installations. We see this especially in the book of Joshua. Given all that we know about Canaan in general, and from archeological evidence in particular, Copan and others conclude that places like Jericho and Ai were military strongholds. In fact, there is no archeological evidence of civilian populations at Jericho or Ai. Historical investigation leads us to conclude that the primary focus of *herem* warfare seems to be directed at military strongholds.

Now, that claim should raise some questions in light of the wording of verses thirty-four and six of our text – which say “we [...] devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children.” How would that be talking about military sites?

And that leads us to a fifth and key point we need to understand regarding these verses, and

others like them, which is that the language used to describe *herem* warfare in the Bible employs the exaggeration and hyperbole that was expected in the war rhetoric of its day. And we learn this from both the study of Ancient Near-East rhetoric and the Bible itself.

First, as our knowledge of Ancient Near-East warfare rhetoric has improved, we've learned that language along the lines of "we killed everyone" was not meant to be taken literally, and the original readers of such claims would have known that they weren't meant literally. This was simply how people talked about warfare in the Ancient Near-East. It wasn't a lie because everyone knew these were phrases meant to indicate a decisive military defeat, and were not generally meant to indicate the actual extermination of all people. These kinds of phrases about killing everyone were used in war records then, the same way sports columnists talk in our day about victory and loss in sports. If an archeologist three-thousand years in the future discovered a sports page of the newspaper from today, and read about how the Yankees "crushed" the Mariners, or the Giants had "slaughtered" the Seahawks, if he concluded that in American sports entertainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the losing team was often literally put to death, then he would have misunderstood 21<sup>st</sup> century sports rhetoric. In the same way, if we read these phrases literally, we misunderstand Ancient Near-East war rhetoric.

And that fact is evident in other ancient documents we have. We have many examples of kings in the Ancient Near-East recording how they killed everyone in a certain place ... and we know from other evidence that they had not actually killed everyone. And the truth was that they weren't claiming to have.

And the Bible shows us the same thing. For example, in Joshua 11 we read this – it says: "Joshua came at that time and cut off the Anakim from the hill country. [...] Joshua devoted them to destruction with their cities. There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel. Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did some remain." But then if we move a few chapters later, in chapters fourteen and fifteen, Caleb asks for permission to drive the Anakites out of the hill country! What is going on here? Was the narrator lying in chapter eleven? Did he forget what he wrote a few chapters earlier? No! Despite the literal meaning of the words, the language of Joshua eleven was meant to indicate a decisive defeat of the enemy, not a total extermination in the region – and the original readers knew that. No one at the time would have read such words as saying that they had actually killed everyone.

We see other examples of this in the Bible as well. Old Testament scholar Richard Hess has written about this topic in more detail, and he argues that the *herem* warfare described in the Old Testament was warfare targeted at the destruction of political leaders and their armies, rather than noncombatants. The lists of those killed that include women, children, and infants in a few of the texts, like in verse thirty-four and verse six this morning, are not meant to be a list of the types of people killed, but these were merely stereotypical phrases used to describe all the inhabitants of a location. And so, when an original reader in the Ancient Near-East read accounts like this, they would not have assumed anything about the actual ages or genders of those who were there. That's why such phrases could be used to describe a military installation – not because they expected to find women, children, or infants in a military encampment in the Ancient Near-East, but because the phrase just meant "everyone there" – and in this case, in the context of Ancient Near-East war rhetoric, it meant especially all the political leaders and warriors. [Capon, 175]

Again, this is not an attempt to wiggle out of what the Bible says, or to deny its truthfulness. The

goal here is to read the Bible the way it intends to be read – by understanding what these phrases would have meant to the original audience, and by using the Bible’s own descriptions to guide us in what it means and doesn’t mean.

And recognizing this kind of hyperbolic Ancient Near-East war rhetoric for what it is, is one way that we do that.

So, taken together, what can we say about what actually happened in the conquest under Moses and Joshua?

In this unique time in redemptive history, God (and God only) had declared judgment on a specific group of people. And he called on Israel to carry that out. The form of the judgment is an attack on their strongholds, in which their leaders and warriors were to be decisively beat and killed.

That means that these passages are not a generalized call to, or approval of, religious violence.

It also means that these texts cannot be used by Christians to excuse verbal or social sins against their enemies.

Both ends of the spectrum should be reoriented if we rightly understand these passages and what they mean.

That said, while this better understanding of the language here modifies some of the first impressions we have of the violence of these passages, it does not eliminate the violence altogether.

The judgment described here is real. And we shouldn’t try to deny that. There was death here. There was a lot of death. And destruction. And it was death, and destruction, ordered by God. Maybe not everyone was killed, but still, a lot of people were killed. The warfare described here was aimed at other warriors, but that does not mean it was limited only to warriors. Surely a range of people died in the process of the conquest. And it was all ordered by God.

What do we make of that?

For that, we need to consider what this text means within the justice of God, the saving mission of God, and the dynamics of sin and salvation.

## **The Justice of God**

First, what does the conquest teach us about the justice of God?

We see at least five things here.

First, we see that God’s justice is patient.

We talked about this a couple weeks ago, but it’s worth repeating. The story of the attack on

Heshbon and Bashan does not begin in Deuteronomy 2. It began back in Genesis 15. There, God promised this land to Abraham. But he also told him it would be generations before the land was given to Abraham's descendants, because, he said, "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." We read here in verse eight that the people of Heshbon and Bashan were Amorites. In other words, from the days of Abraham, God had waited over 500 years – half a millennium – before bringing his judgment on the people. He waited patiently, until the guilt of these Amorites had reached a certain level, each generation building on the evil, and sin, and injustice, of the last.

Christians believe that even one sin is worthy of God's judgment, and that is right. But even so, God, in his justice, is patient. He gave the Amorites time to repent – centuries to repent – and waited until they reached a certain level of evil before he brought judgment on them as a people.

Second, God offers an escape from judgment.

We see this in verses twenty-six and twenty-seven. Moses sent an offer of peace. But Sihon refused it.

Of course it does say in verses thirty and thirty-one that God hardened Sihon's heart. But that doesn't mean that Sihon was a puppet. The Bible holds out to us the equally valid truths of God's sovereignty and the reality of human decisions and responsibility.

The Bible speaks strongly of both of those truths, and whenever it speaks of one it assumes the other. Yes, God was fully sovereign over Sihon's choices and his rebellion. And at the same time, Sihon's choices were real, they were really his own, and he was truly responsible for them. Sihon chose his rebellion against God. God was sovereign over it. In a mystery, both those facts were completely true at the same time. [Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 38]

So the offer of peace was real. And the rejection of that offer by the people of Heshbon was also real.

Third, when destruction comes to the Amorites, God's justice is truly the driving force.

The destruction of the conquest is not to be viewed as God helping Israel get some good land by hacking up the previous residents, with God's help. God is the main actor here, not Israel. God is not working for Israel, but Israel here is an instrument of God.

This is stressed in Deuteronomy 9. [Wright, *TGIDU*, 94-95] There, speaking of the conquest, we read these words addressed to Israel:

<sup>4</sup> "Do not say in your heart, after Yahweh your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that Yahweh has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that Yahweh is driving them out before you. <sup>5</sup> Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations Yahweh your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that Yahweh swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

<sup>6</sup> "Know, therefore, that Yahweh your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people."

God's justice is the driving force here in the conquest – not Israel's desires.

Fourth, God's justice is universal.

It can be tempting to read about the conquest as if Yahweh is just another tribal deity, fighting for those he likes and judging those he does not, but God's justice is much greater than that.

One way we know this is because God's judgment falls on Israel too. It will fall on them repeatedly in the book of Judges, and the books of Samuel and Kings. In fact, lest we forget, just last week we were reminded of how God killed an entire generation of Israel in the wilderness. God may use different means in different settings, but his justice is universal. [Wright, *TGIDU*, 95-96]

Fifth, God's justice is good and right.

It is a justice that brings evil to an end. It punishes the oppressor. It eliminates sin, and it restores the world to being more like it was meant to be – a place that is good and right.

We know that we need justice to be done in this world. We know that we want justice to be done in this world. Without justice, there is no hope for this world. And so we must remember that God's justice in the conquest was good and right.

The cultures of Canaan had become truly terrible. They were characterized by social oppression, by violence, by sexual immorality, and even by child sacrifice. [Wright, *TGIDU*, 93].

It was not a good or pleasant thing to live in these brutal societies. And God determined that their sin had become so heinous, that it had to be put to an end. And so he brought judgment.

Now ... as we consider that reality, our minds often turn to the unknowns. What about the victims of this society – why did this judgment fall on them too? What about the children who may have been harmed or even killed in the process? (As we said, children were not really the targets of the conquest, but it is naïve to think they were not harmed or even killed at times in the process.)

The fact is that we don't know the answers to these questions. And our calling is to trust that God, in all his dealings, was just.

Perhaps they too were judged for their sins – for we confess that human beings are sinful from conception, and even when we are sinned against, we often respond with sin in return, limited more by how much power we have than any sort of moral restraint on our part.

Or perhaps they received mercy. As we will discuss in a minute, we learn from Rahab both that the people of the land had heard of Israel and Yahweh, and that some, like Rahab had believed. Even if they were killed in the warfare that followed, might some have been eternally saved by faith? Might physical death have served, for them, in God's mysterious providence, as a deliverance from the spiritual death of their culture?

And we might ask similar questions about the children. Our church's confession of faith states that God is more than capable of effectually calling and saving infants. [WCF 10.3] We have good reason to assume he does that when infants die within the covenant. Outside the covenant, we are not told much, and so while various speculations exist in the Reformed tradition, in the end, we entrust them to God's justice and mercy.

And the same unknown remains for the infants who may have died as a result of the conquest. Were they judged for their sin as well? Or might physical death have served, for them, in God's mysterious providence, as a deliverance from the spiritual death of their culture? The truth is that we're simply not told. And so, any conclusion we draw is speculation. To say God was condemning all is speculation. To say he may have saved some is speculation. [Wright, *TGIDU*, 96]

The right thing to do with those unknowns is to trust God – to say, with Abraham: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” [Genesis 18:25b]

In all these ways, in the conquest of Canaan, we see the justice of God.

### **The Saving Mission of God**

Obviously, the justice of God is the main thing we often think of when we consider the conquest. And yet, the conquest also must be understood within the saving mission of God. And that is true both in the big-picture, and in the details.

First, let's consider the big-picture view. Remember God's overall plan with Israel. In Genesis he promised to be with Abraham and his descendants, to bless their allies and judge their enemies, to give them a land, to make them a great nation, and he promised that in Abraham's offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

That last promise and purpose remains, even here. God is still working towards that greater end. And while the conquest may seem contrary to that, it's not really. God's ultimate goal may have been blessing the nations through Israel, but that didn't mean he would have to be nice to every single nation along the way, no matter how wicked they were. It didn't mean he would cease to be the just judge of the world. [Wright, *TGIDU*, 100]

Now, to be fair, Israel at the time may have had trouble connecting all the dots from the conquest to the blessing of all nations, but just because the path between those two actions was unclear does not mean that it did not exist.

That blessing remained the big picture, and the conquest was a step in God's purpose for and with Israel towards that goal.

But even as we keep the conquest in perspective with the big picture, we should also consider the details of how God was at work among the Canaanites themselves.

We have already mentioned some speculative theoretical possibilities, but let's talk about some of the concrete examples we are told of.

One obvious example was Rahab. In Joshua 2 we are told how she received the spies, she believed in Yahweh, and she was spared and saved. And she said to the spies: “I know that Yahweh has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how Yahweh dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for Yahweh your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” [Joshua 2:9-11]

That is quite the confession of faith. We might wonder if others shared Rahab’s faith, and as we do, we turn to the Gibeonites.

In Joshua 9 we read of how the Gibeonites deceived Israel into making peace with them not just as repentant individuals like Rahab and her family, but as a whole people. There is a lot going on there, but at the core the Gibeonites, as a group, believed in the power of Yahweh, and sought peace with Israel – even if it meant being Israel’s servants. As a result, they were spared, and they were assigned to be servants for the house of God – the tabernacle of Yahweh.

And then there are the Jebusites, highlighted by Christopher Wright. These are Canaanites whom Israel had trouble driving out. They were not defeated in the initial conquest. Instead, they held on to Jerusalem, and were not dislodged until the days of David [2 Sam 5:6-10].

But even then, Wright notes, the Jebusites were not destroyed, but they seemed, over time, to have been absorbed into the tribe of Judah, and came “to be included within the covenant people.”

We see this in the second half of Zechariah 9:7. There the prophet speaks of the Jebusites as having become like a clan in Judah, and he holds out the hope that one day the Philistines too will be brought into Israel like the Jebusites were.

As Christopher Wright puts it: “the Jebusites had moved from being on the *herem* list of enemy nations before the conquest to being a clan within Judah living right in the city of David,” and a model for what Yahweh could do with other pagan nations. [TGIDU, 102-103]

In all this we see that God’s saving mission was not on hold during the conquest, but through and even in the details of the conquest God was bringing about his saving mission to all nations, working towards the goal of the covenant with Abraham, and towards the final result that we read of in the Book of Revelation, when the Apostle John notes that the people of God, surrounding the throne of heaven, were a people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” [Rev 7:9] That is the picture of the final result of the work of God.

And so we must understand the conquest in the context of God’s saving mission.

## **The Saving Work of God**

Now ... we have said a number of things.

First, we have clarified what the conquest was and what it wasn't, and we've discussed the historical meaning of the phrases of annihilation.

Second, we have placed the violence of the conquest in the framework of God's justice – his justice which is patient, which is open to repentance, but which ultimately brings judgment on those who do not repent.

And third, we've talked about the ways that through, and even in the midst of the conquest, God was at work carrying out his saving mission, incorporating people into his kingdom, and bringing them to repentance and saving faith.

That is all good. But as we discuss those things, we need to be careful not to lose an important thing here. The conquest, still, was brutal. It was brutal, and bloody, and violent.

Let's not lose sight of that. These battles were ugly. There was death and destruction and pain. Why? Why was there death and destruction and pain?

Was it because God – because Yahweh – delights in death and destruction and pain? No – not if we are to believe the rest of the Bible. In Genesis we read that God made a world free of death – a world without the kind of brutality we read of in the conquest. In Revelation we read that God's plan for us, for eternity, is a world made new, in which there is no more death, no more pain, and no more mourning. God does not delight in death or destruction or pain.

And so why then do we see him engaged in this work of death and destruction and pain here?

And the answer is sin. Sin brings death and destruction and pain into the picture. And any battle with sin – any confrontation with sin will ultimately involve death and destruction and pain.

This is what the Bible tells us about God's justice. If we cling to our sin, if we refuse to renounce it, if we refuse to seek cleansing from it from God, if we choose to serve sin as our master, to rebel against God's rule in our lives, then at the final judgment, when God confronts our sin, he will also be confronting us. And as we cling to our rebellion against him – as we cling to our sin – then our confrontation with God will be one of death, and destruction, and pain – not just for a moment but for all of eternity – not because God delights in those things, but because death and destruction and pain are part of any true confrontation between God and sin. And if we continue to hold to our sin, we will be caught up in that confrontation.

But, of course, that is not the only possibility. There is another possibility for us. Though it too, in its way, is also characterized by death, and destruction, and pain.

The other possibility is we accept God's offer of peace to us. We renounce our rebellion. We give our ultimate allegiance to him. And he promises to cleanse us – to forgive us of our sin.

Yet, even in forgiveness, God must confront our sin. He must battle with it. And in that battle, there will still be death, and destruction, and pain. And that is what happened on the cross. [Wright, 107]

In the incarnation God himself came to earth as man, in the person of Jesus Christ. And he lived a life that was pure – he lived a life without sin. And then he went to the cross, and there he took onto himself our sin, and when he did, God poured out his justice on our sin, in the person of Christ. And Christ experienced the pain, and the death, and the destruction of that encounter. It all fell on him so that it need not fall on you.

All the ugliness brought about by God’s just encounter with sin ... all that we imagine portrayed in the conquest ... all the death and destruction and pain, fell on Christ, so that you could be forgiven ... so that you could be set free ... so that you could live forever with God, in paradise at the resurrection.

And Christ not only died for our sin, but he rose again, coming out of the encounter with sin victoriously.

There is a lot to see in the conquest. But if we see nothing else, let’s be sure to see the unavoidable result of God’s confrontation with sin. And let us give thanks that in Christ, our gracious God took that pain and violence onto himself, so that we could be forgiven, and could live with him forever.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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