

by ***Richard Van de Ruit***

It has regularly come to my attention that both unbelievers and Christians alike struggle with the commands that God gave to Israel to systematically wipe out whole people groups in Canaan (See Deuteronomy 7:1-6 and Deuteronomy 20:16-18). This commandment was executed under the leadership of Joshua and is recorded in the Bible book that bears his name.

My mother struggled with this as well and as a result was not able to reconcile the message of the Old Testament with that of the New Testament. The Old Testament seems to portray an angry, vindictive God, who is ready to wipe out whole nations while the New Testament portrays Jesus as a loving savior. Jesus clearly states that, *“If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”* (John 14:7) How do we answer questions like this one?

I believe that the key to unlocking this mystery is in how we understand the progression of events leading up to the execution of this God given commandment. It all starts with Abraham receiving God’s promise in Genesis 15:6. Here God responds favorably to Abraham’s faith. Abraham trusted God that He would fulfill his promise for him to become the ‘father of many nations’. He believed even though he still did not have any children!

God responds with making a covenant agreement with Abraham and in this he gives a curious promise:

“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’... On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.” (Genesis 15:13-21)

God shares his intentions with Abraham and gives him a glimpse into the future:

- His descendants will be slaves in a foreign country for 400 years.
- God will redeem them from slavery.
- After 400 years Abraham’s descendants will return to Canaan and take possession of this land.
- The Amorites (representing all the other tribes residing in Canaan) would be given 400 years until the level of their sinfulness would invoke God’s judgement.

In this last point I believe we have an important clue as to the mercy and grace of God in the Old

Testament. Four hundred years is a very long period. It would bring us back to the 16th Century and the arrival of Johan van Riebeeck in the Cape!

Abram had been chosen and called by God to come out of his idolatrous city and to follow God. Abram obeyed and finally settled as a nomad in Canaan. Together with his family, they lived as representatives of the only true God. They were to be a blessing to the nations of Canaan. (Genesis 12:1-3)

We see a glimpse of this when Abram sets out to rescue his nephew Lot and all the other inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah after they had been defeated and taken as spoil by their enemies. After successfully liberating Sodom and Gomorrah, though they were a terribly wicked people (Genesis 13:13), they did not thank the God of Abram for their deliverance or repent of their sinful ways. (Genesis 14:22-23)

Through Abram, God offered mercy and grace, but they failed to acknowledge or accept this. It is not surprising that a few years later final judgement was meted out to them. (Genesis 18 & 19)

But how does this answer the question about the character of God? For this we have to move about 400 years forwards in history from the time of Abram. Israel has arrived on the border of Canaan and is encamped near the gateway city of Jericho. They know that God has given the land to them but they are not quite sure how they will conquer the land.

What happened before this encounter gives us the insight we need. Joshua had sent two spies to gather intelligence about Jericho. When the two spies seek shelter and refuge with a prostitute in the city, she shares the following with them:

"I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts sank and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." (Joshua 2:8-11)

What did Rahab conclude?

- She acknowledges the Lord of Israel as God.
- God had given Canaan to Israel.
- The inhabitants of Canaan recognised the imminent judgement and were in great fear and terror.
- They had heard what had happened in Egypt.
- They had heard what had happened to the kings east of the Jordan, who opposed Israel and refused them passage.
- Everyone in Canaan heard about this and lost courage.

- The God of Israel is the only true God!

Rahab was well informed about the feelings and fears of the people of Canaan. She mentions however some very important facts:

- They already knew that God had given Canaan 400 years of grace
- Then he gave them 40 years of advanced warning as news of what God did for Israel in Egypt was well known in Canaan.
- The recent defeat of the kings of Sihon and Og had also reached their ears.
- They were very afraid, knowing full well that they were next in line to be judged.
- They knew that the God of Israel was the true God!

Before drawing this to a conclusion, it is important to take note of the moral and spiritual condition of the nations that inhabited Canaan. They were steeped in sin, occultism, witchcraft, idolatry, (Deuteronomy 18:9-11) sacrificing of their children to Moloch, incest, adultery, bestiality, consulting the dead, mediums & omens, etc. God called this 'the abominable ways of the Canaanites.' God's mercy had run its course, the times of the Canaanites and Amorites had come to an end, their measure of sin had reached its peak and as a result God's judgement was impending and could no longer be withheld.

It is important to draw attention to the generational implications. The sin of the Amorites and Canaanites had reached a level of no return. They could not live together with God's people as God made it very clear that they would influence the Israelites to do the same wicked things. God is interested in protecting his people from the temptations around them and not only them but also their children and generations yet to be born.

How does Rahab respond to the threat of judgement? She has heard God's voice through the events of history. Will she harden her heart? She pleads for mercy and asks the spies to remember her when judgement is meted out on Jericho.

How does Jericho and its people respond? They hide behind their impressive walls and the city gate was firmly shut! (Joshua 6:1) They shut out the only hope they had! While Rahab opened her heart to receive God's mercy, they firmly shut their gates to the God who alone could have offered them mercy. By shutting their gates, they shut God out and subsequently invoked his judgement.

God could have simply 'nuked' the whole of Canaan, raining down fire and brimstone like he did on Sodom and Gomorrah, but he didn't. He commanded the Israelites to conquer the land, city by city, town by town, people by people. Each community had an opportunity to take heed of what had happened to the neighboring city that had fallen under the sword of Israel and God's wrath, but they chose to resist and harden themselves in their rebellion against God. They trusted in their own false idols and the fake security these provided.

It is so easy to read the stories of the conquest without considering the wider context of the Bible.

Previous to this, God had brought judgement on not just the people of a country, but on the whole world! Before pouring forth his divine wrath on the people of the world, God commissioned Noah, not just as an ark builder, but as a preacher of righteousness. (2 Peter 2:5)

Reading the Bible, we should take heed of the warnings of impending judgement which God will visit upon the earth. For As surely as it was meted out on the wicked people through history, so it will happen again. Jesus warns of this, as do the other writers of both the Old the New Testament. How do we respond? Do we like the people of Canaan simply ignore the coming judgement, foolishly deceiving ourselves that this will never happen?

Many followers of Jesus have been sadly deluded by a misunderstanding of the character of God and his dealings with mankind. They do not believe that *"righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne; love and faithfulness go before him."* (Psalm 89:14) Like Jonah, they look the other way, they run away from their God given responsibility to share the Good News (and the bad news) that in his Son, Jesus Christ, God has provided a way of escape from his wrath and that in him there is forgiveness for sin and an offer of peace. But if we do not share this, how will they hear?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Richard has been married for 28 years to Sue. They have 3 children: Rachel, Hannah & Caleb and have worked in Uganda for 22 years doing kingdom work but now reside in South Africa.

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