

Sermon XXIX

"The Destruction of the Canaanites"

by
William Paley

"So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings; he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded" (Joshua 10:40).

I have known serious and well disposed Christians much affected with the accounts, which are delivered in the Old Testament, of the Jewish wars and dealings with the inhabitants of Canaan. From the Israelites first setting foot in that country to their complete establishment in it, which takes up the whole book of Joshua and part of the book of Judges, we read (it must be confessed) of massacres and desolations unlike what are practiced now-a-days between nations at war--of cities and districts laid waste, of the inhabitants being totally destroyed--and this, as it is alleged in the history, by the authority and command of Almighty God. Some have been induced to think such accounts incredible, inasmuch as such conduct could never, they say, be authorized by the good and merciful Governor of the universe.

I intend in the following discourse to consider this matter so far as to show [1] that these transactions were calculated for a beneficial purpose, and for the general advantage of mankind; [2] and being so calculated, were not inconsistent either with the justice of God or with the usual proceedings of divine providence.

Now the first and chief thing to be observed is that the nations of Canaan were destroyed for their wickedness. In proof of this point I produce the 18th chapter of Leviticus, the 24th and the following verses. Moses, in this chapter, after laying down prohibitions against brutal and abominable vices, proceeds in the 24th verse thus:

Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not commit *any* of these abominations, *either* any of your own nation or any stranger who dwells among you (for all these abominations the men of the land have done, who *were* before you, and thus the land is defiled), lest the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that *were* before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations, the persons who commit *them* shall be cut off from among their people. Therefore you shall keep My ordinance, so that *you* do not commit *any* of these abominable customs which were committed before you, and that you do not defile yourselves by them. [NKJV]

Now the facts disclosed in this passage are for our present purpose extremely material and extremely satisfactory. First, the passage testifies the principal point, namely, that the Canaanites were the wicked people we represent them to be; and that this point does not rest upon supposition but upon proof. In particular, the following words contain an express assertion

of the guilt of that people: "In all these the nations are defiled, which I cast out before you; for all these abominations have the men of the land done."

Secondly, the form and turn of expression seems to show that these detestable practices were general among them and habitual. They are said to be abominable *customs* which were committed. Now the word custom is not applicable to a few single or extraordinary instances, but to usage and to national character; which argues that not only the practice but the sense and notion of morality was corrupted among them, or lost. And it is observable that these practices, so far from being checked by their religion, formed a part of it. They are described not only under the name of abominations, but of abominations which they have done unto their gods. What a state of national morals must that have been!

Thirdly, the passage before us positively and directly asserts that it was for these sins that the nations of Canaan were destroyed. This, in my judgment, is the important part of the inquiry. And what do the words under consideration declare? "In all these, namely, the odious and brutal vices which had been spoken of, the nations are defiled, which I cast out before you: and the land is defiled: *therefore* I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it." This is the reason and cause of the calamities which I bring on it. The land itself vomits out her inhabitants. The very land is sick of its inhabitants, of their odious and brutal practices, of their corruption and wickedness. This, and no other, was the reason for destroying them. This, and no other, is the reason here alleged.

It was not, as has been imagined, to make way for the Israelites; nor was it simply for their idolatry. It appears to me extremely probable that idolatry in those times led, in all countries, to the vices here described. And also that the detestation, threats, and severities expressed against idolatry in the Old Testament were not against idolatry simply, or considered as an erroneous religion, but against the abominable crimes which usually accompanied it. I think it quite certain that the case was so in the nations of Canaan.

Fourthly, it appears from the passage before us, and what is surely of great consequence to the question, that God's abhorrence and God's treatment of these crimes were impartial--without distinction and without respect of nations or persons. The words which point out the divine impartiality are those in which Moses warns the Israelites against falling into any of the like wicked courses; "that the land," says he, "cast not you out also, when you defile it, as it cast out the nations that were before you; for whoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them, shall be cut off from among their people."

The Jews are sometimes called the chosen and favored people of God; and in a certain sense, and for some purposes, they were so. Yet is this very people, both in this place and in other places, over and over again reminded that if they followed the same practices they must expect the same fate. "Ye shall not walk in the way of the nations which I cast out before you: for they committed all those things, and therefore I abhorred them; as the nations which the Lord destroyed before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye were not obedient unto the voice of the Lord your God."

What farther proves not only the justice but the clemency of God--his long suffering, and that it was the incorrigible wickedness of those nations which at last drew down upon them their destruction--is that he suspended (as we may so say) the stroke, till their wickedness was come to such a pitch that they were no longer to be endured. In the 15th chapter of Genesis, God tells Abraham that his descendants of the fourth generation should return into that country, and not before: "for the iniquity," says he, "of the Amorites is not yet full." It should seem from hence

that so long as their crimes were confined within any bounds, they were permitted to remain in their country.

We conclude therefore, and we are well warranted in concluding, that the Canaanites were destroyed on account of their wickedness. And that wickedness was perhaps aggravated by their having had among them Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--examples of a purer religion and a better conduct; still more by the judgments of God so remarkably set before them in the history of Abraham's family; [and] particularly by the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. At least these things prove that they were not without warning, and that God did not leave himself without witness among them.

Now when God, for the wickedness of a people, sends an earthquake, or a fire, or a plague among them, there is no complaint of injustice--especially when the calamity is known or expressly declared beforehand to be inflicted for the wickedness of such people. It is rather regarded as an act of exemplary penal justice, and as such consistent with the character of the moral Governor of the universe. The objection, therefore, is not to the Canaanitish nations being destroyed (for when their national wickedness is considered and when that is expressly stated as the cause of their destruction, the dispensation however severe will not be questioned), but the objection is solely to the manner of destroying them. I mean, there is nothing but the manner left to be objected to; their wickedness accounts for the thing itself.

To which objection it may be replied: That if the thing itself be just, the manner is of little signification; of little signification even to the sufferers themselves. For where is the great difference, even to them, whether they were destroyed by an earthquake, a pestilence, a famine, or by the hands of an enemy? Where is the difference (even to our imperfect apprehensions of divine justice), provided it be, and is known to be, for their wickedness that they are destroyed? But this destruction, you say, confounded the innocent with the guilty. The sword of Joshua and of the Jews spared neither women nor children. Is it not the same with all other national visitations? Would not an earthquake, or a fire, or a plague, or a famine among them have done the same?

Even in an ordinary and natural death the same thing happens. God takes away the life he lends without regard, that we can perceive, to age or sex or character. But, after all, [it is] promiscuous massacres, the burning of cities, the laying waste of countries [that] are things dreadful to reflect upon. Who doubts it? [But] so are all the judgments of Almighty God. The effect, in whatever way it shows itself, must necessarily be tremendous when the Lord, as the Psalmist expresses it, "moves out of his place to punish the wicked." But it ought to satisfy us. At least this is the point upon which we ought to rest and fix our attention: ***that it was for excessive, willful, and forewarned wickedness that all this befell them, and that it is expressly so declared in the history which recites it.***

But further, if punishing them by the hands of the Israelites (rather than by a pestilence, an earthquake, a fire, or any such calamity) be still an objection, we may perceive, I think, some reasons for this method of punishment in preference to any other whatever; always, however, bearing in our mind that the question is not concerning the justice of the punishment but the mode of it.

It is well known that the people of those ages were affected by no proof of the power of the gods which they worshiped so deeply as by their giving them victory in war. It was by this species of

evidence that the superiority of their own god, above the gods of the nations which they conquered, was in their opinion evinced. This being the actual persuasion which then prevailed in the world, no matter whether well or ill founded, how were the neighboring nations (for whose admonition this dreadful example was intended), how were they to be convinced of the supreme power of the God of Israel above the pretended gods of other nations, and of the righteous character of Jehovah, that is, of his abhorrence of the vices which prevailed in the land of Canaan? How, I say, were they to be convinced so well, or at all indeed, [except] as by enabling the Israelites (whose God he was known and acknowledged to be) to conquer under his banner and drive out before them those who resisted the execution of that commission with which the Israelites declared themselves to be invested--the expulsion and extermination of the Canaanitish nations?

This convinced surrounding countries (and all who were observers or spectators of what passed), first, that the God of Israel was a real God. Secondly, that the gods which other nations worshiped were either no gods or had no power against the God of Israel. And, thirdly, that it was he and he alone who possessed both the power and the will to punish, to destroy, and to exterminate from before his face both nations and individuals who gave themselves up to the crimes and wickedness for which the Canaanites were notorious. Nothing of this sort would have appeared, or with the same evidence however, from an earthquake, or a plague, or any natural calamity. These might not have been attributed to divine agency at all, or not to the interposition of the God of Israel.

Another reason which made this destruction both more necessary and more general than it would have otherwise been, was the consideration that if any of the old inhabitants were left, they would prove a snare to those who succeeded them in the country; would draw and seduce them by degrees into the vices and corruptions which prevailed among themselves. Vice of all kind, but vice most particularly of the licentious kind, is astonishingly infectious. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. A small number of persons, addicted to them and allowed to practice them with impunity or encouragement, will spread them through the whole mass. This reason is formally and expressly assigned not simply for the punishment, but the extent to which it was carried: namely, extermination. "Thou shalt *utterly* destroy them, that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods."

To conclude: In reading the Old Testament account of the Jewish wars and conquests in Canaan, and the terrible destruction brought upon the inhabitants thereof, we are constantly to bear in our minds:

[1] That we are reading the execution of a dreadful but just sentence, pronounced by God against the intolerable and incorrigible crimes of these nations.

[2] That they were intended to be made an example to the whole world of God's avenging wrath against sins of this magnitude and this kind--sins, which if they had been suffered to continue, might have polluted the whole ancient world and which could only be checked by the signal and public overthrow of nations notoriously addicted to them; and so addicted as to have incorporated them even into their religion and their public institutions.

[3] That the miseries inflicted upon the nations by the invasion of the Jews were expressly declared to be inflicted on account of their abominable sins--that God had borne with them long.

[4] That God did not proceed to execute his judgments till their wickedness was full.

[5] That the Israelites were mere instruments in the hands of a righteous providence for the effectuating the extermination of a people whom it was necessary to make a public example to the rest of mankind.

[6] That this extermination (which might have been accomplished by a pestilence, by fire, by earthquakes) was appointed to be done by the hands of the Israelites as being the clearest and most intelligible method of displaying the power and righteousness of the God of Israel--his power over the pretended gods of other nations, and his righteous hatred of the crimes into which they were fallen.

This is the true statement of the case. It is no forced or invented construction, but the idea of the transaction set forth in scripture; and it is an idea which, if retained in our thoughts, may fairly, I think, reconcile us to everything which we read in the Old Testament concerning it.

This is Sermon XXIX of *Sermons on Several Subjects* by the late Rev. William Paley, D.D. (Philadelphia: Printed for Hopkins and Earle, 1808). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.