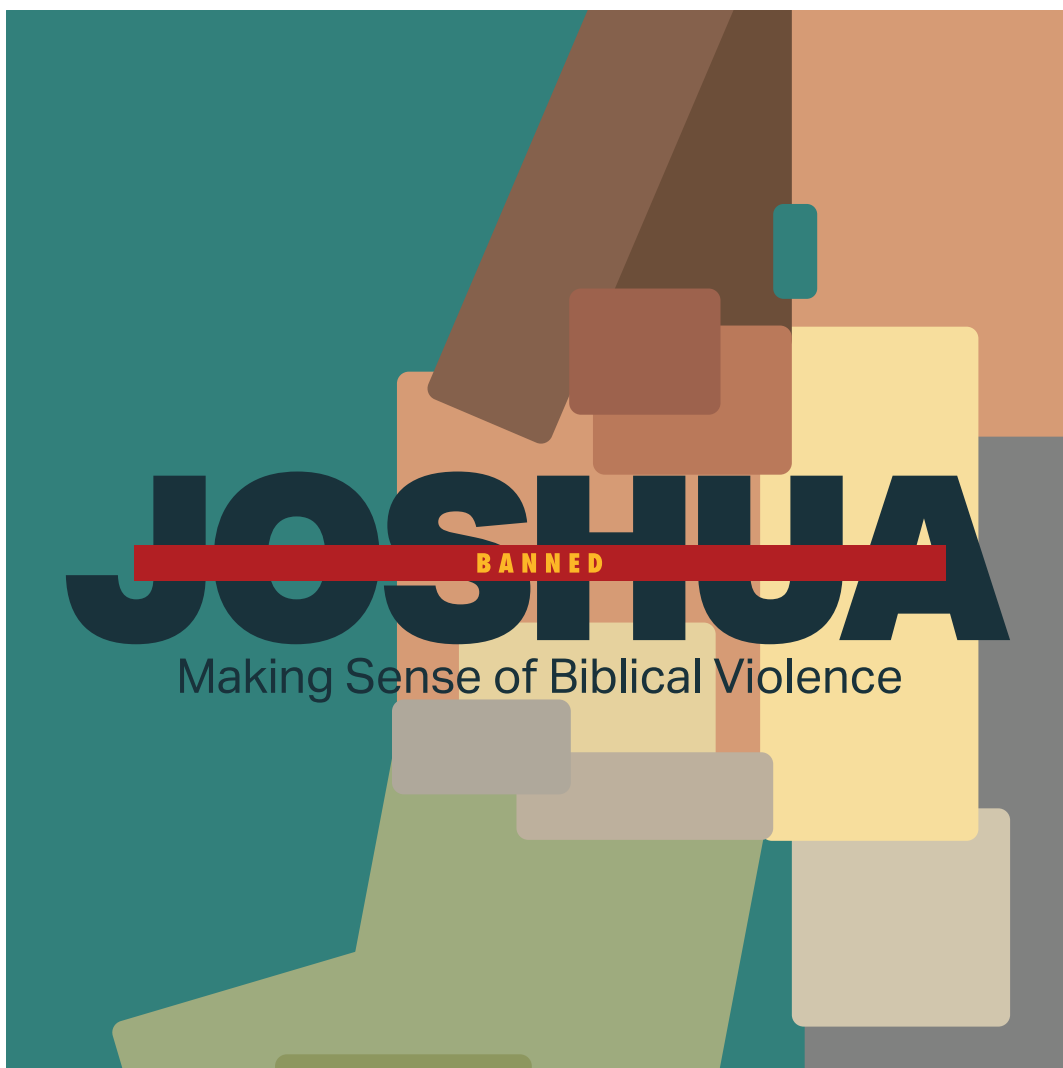




A SERIES STUDY GUIDE

Week 3

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Banned | The Book of Joshua

Week 3: Choose Again

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we see that the Israelite's relationship to the land is complicated. They go from sojourners, to slaves, to wanderers, to conquerors. It is *their* land, promised to them, but when they arrive in it, they find out that it seems to already belong to others.

This does not trouble them for long, though, because the Lord their God is on their side. And God will ensure they overcome all opposition and take possession. In fact, while the Israelite army moves, it is really God at work. Like the ultimate lawnmower parent, God seems to orchestrate the destruction of the other nations at the same time that God empowers the army of the Israelites. In Joshua 10, we see this play out:

The Lord said to Joshua, "Do not fear them, for I have handed them over to you; not one of them shall stand before you." So Joshua came upon them suddenly, having marched up all night from Gilgal. And the Lord threw them into a panic before Israel, who inflicted a crushing blow on them at Gibeon, chased them by the way of the ascent of Beth-horon, and struck them down as far as Azekah and Makkedah. As they fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the Lord threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword.

Not only did God hand the opposing armies over to Israel ahead of time, God threw them into a panic, and after Israel "inflicted a crushing blow," God threw down gigantic heavenly stones, which ended up killing more people than Israel's army ever did. Great for Israel. Horrific for literally everyone else.

Again, the book of Joshua can be atrocious. And God's behavior here? Honestly, no thanks.

What do we do with texts like these? How does this even make sense in light of the scriptures as a whole? Especially as Christians, how can we read Joshua and see its connection to a God who eats with outcasts, forgives sins, and loves the world?

In order to get anywhere close to reconciling how God calls us to be through Jesus and how God shows up in Joshua, we must be mindful of our engagement with scripture. Scripture is a diverse and nuanced collection of writings, composed over the course of thousands of years

in order to tell the story of the one true God's presence and power in the world. This is told through the relationship God has with humanity, specifically through the account of a select group of people. It is a story of Divine grace and love for the entirety of creation, for the transformation of the world and all who live on it. And it's told through a series of different texts, styles, and languages, all that requires translation and, necessarily, interpretation. Thus we engage with scripture in a variety of ways that helps us make sense of it.

In one sense, scripture functions as a window, a lens through which we see the world, helping us interpret and discern our role in it. But sometimes, like when a train suddenly enters a tunnel, scripture can turn into a mirror, and force us to look more closely at the reality of ourselves.

How we approach scripture might shift throughout the course of our lives and the dynamic nature of this sacred text means that different parts of scripture invite us to approach it in different ways. Sometimes scripture might show us how we should be, and sometimes it makes us confront how we are.

This worship series invites us to engage with the book of Joshua as more of a mirror than a lens. If we approach it as instruction for how we should view the world, then it can present a narrow, jealous, vengeful God, bent on isolation for God's people and destruction of all others. But if we approach it like we do a mirror, it helps us to see how easy it is for us to prioritize our identity, our power, our need for stability to the detriment of all others, even to the detriment of our relationship with God.

Yet, interestingly, in Joshua, there are exceptions to what seems like a pretty clear cut expectation of mass destruction, stories that challenge the overarching narrative that it presents. These two exceptions reveal that even in self-fulfilling and self-aggrandizing stories, things are never as simple as they seem.

The first story is of Rahab. A woman whose clever and gracious hospitality saves her entire family from the crushing walls of Jericho when they tumble down. When the Israelite spies go to check out the city, they go to Rahab's house. We are told she's a prostitute, which provides the financial explanation as to why she has her own home, and how she supports her whole family. When the king hears that these spies have

entered the city and have gone to her house, he demands that she reveal the Israelites so he can have them killed. But she doesn't. She hides the men on her roof, under some flax stalks, lies to the king, and helps the spies to escape. Before they go, however, she makes a deal with them that when the Israelite army destroys her city (which she knows they are going to do), they would allow her and her family to live. Rahab also makes a powerful declaration for someone who is considered an outsider, an enemy of God's chosen people, and a citizen of the soon to be decimated Jericho.

She proclaims, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below." (Joshua 2:11b)

A stranger, an enemy, a prostitute recognizes the truth about who God is, and makes a striking statement of faith. Her family is indeed spared from the destruction, and they thrive and continue to live in Israel from this point forward. Much, much later, we read Rahab's name again in scripture. In the gospel of Matthew, we see that Rahab is the mother of Boaz, who is the ancestor of David, who becomes King of Israel, and is himself the ancestor of Jesus.

Rahab has a sacred legacy. She also reveals a deep awareness of God. But it's not awareness itself that saves her. Everyone in Jericho (and in the other surrounding nations) is aware of what's coming their way. As she says to the spies, "I know that the Lord has given you the land and that dread of you has fallen on us and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you." (Joshua 2:9) What rescues her and her family and all who belong to her is her choice to act. When faced with the decision of how to respond to the situation before her, she chooses to align herself with God, and by saving the lives of the spies, she saves her own life as well.

The second exception to the mass annihilation of the native nations, is an interesting story of deception that ends up working out. It has to do with the Hivites, inhabitants of the city of Gibeon. Gibeon was a Canaanite city, about 3 days away from where the Israelites had just destroyed the city of Ai. Like the other nations, the Hivites knew that Israel was there to destroy everything in their path. So they decided to find a work around. They dressed up their ambassadors in old clothes, gave them moldy food, and worn out wineskins. Then they approached Joshua and the other leaders and said they were from a land far, far away. *Just look at their diminished and rotting supplies as evidence of how long it had taken them to get there!* They humbly asked for a treaty, so that Israel would not destroy them.

Without seeking God's input, the Israelite leaders agreed. When the army approached Gibeon 3 days later, they were informed that because of the treaty the Israelite leaders had made, they would not be destroying Gibeon or any of the other Hivite cities.

The army wasn't particularly happy about this, and neither was Joshua. When he asked why the Gibeonites had tricked them, their reasoning was obvious and simple. They knew the Lord had told Moses that all the inhabitants of the land were to be destroyed, and they didn't want to die. Joshua had to honor the treaty, which is the same Hebrew word as "covenant," and instead of being destroyed, the Hivites became "woodcutters and drawers of water" for the house of the Lord. The Hivite nation tricks Israel and survives, thriving alongside them. As an etiological story, this would explain why there are non-Israelites serving as Temple workers at the time this tale is recounted.

But in the narrative, this story functions as an extraordinary exception to an appalling rule. When read along with the story of Rahab, it turns out that actually not ALL of the nations are destroyed.¹ There are survivors who become part of the community, and contribute to the functioning of the whole.

What these stories reveal is that even when the end seems written, even when the command seems clear, even when it's a zero sum game, and it's all or nothing...it actually is not. There is always a choice, a chance for grace, a moment of opportunity to go a different way.

The Israelites have a choice also. At the very end of the book, before he dies, Joshua challenges them to really understand the covenant that is between them and God. He reminds them of all that God did for them, how God brought their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—away from their homeland and even though they originally served other gods, the Lord is the one who saved them from slavery in Egypt, and helped them to defeat all their enemies. As God says to them, "I gave you a land on which you had not labored and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant." (Joshua 24:13)

So Joshua puts the decision before them,
Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the Lord.

1 In Judges 2:22-23, we actually read that this is intentional on God's part in order to determine if Israel really would remain in relationship with the Lord or not.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:14-15)

The people declare that they will indeed serve the Lord, but Joshua is skeptical. He warns them that they really have to mean it. Because it will be hard when the gods of the other people in the land are more tempting to worship. The other gods are connected to the everyday contractual qualities of the world around them, instead of a deep relationship rooted in shared history and knowing. Which actually means that the other gods are easy to manipulate for human satisfaction. Give them a simple ritual and they claim to provide rain, harvest, minerals, etc, whatever the humans need.² For the Israelites (and for us) sometimes it's easier to deal with those who don't require anything more of us beyond a merely transactional engagement, those whom we don't actually have to know and who don't know us.

But the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob is the Lord who sees and knows and saves and leads and forgives and loves. God gives them the land because they have traveled so far and have for so long been without land. But the land is not a substitute for a relationship with God. This is the tension of this text and, really, all of scripture. The

2 All things that seem to come from the very land that they now finally have only as a result of their ancestral covenantal relationship with God. The irony.

land might be lost (spoiler alert, it will be), but God will never leave them and will be with them wherever they go. So Joshua urges the people, whatever happens, whatever they do, to stay in relationship with God.

What the book of Joshua ends up presenting is that there is always a choice. Like Rahab, the Hivites, and the Israelites themselves, we always have a choice in how we live, act, treat others, or worship God. It is not always clear cut, it is not always easy, and we don't always know where our choices will lead us. But God is with us, too. Always.

The reality of Joshua is pretty disturbing. It calls us to relationship and connection at the same time that it presents an overwhelmingly violent and unnecessarily cruel takeover of inhabited land, justified by a seemingly vicious God. And this book has been used by the religious descendants of the people of God to justify the ongoing oppression and outright destruction of entire peoples whom they view as "other."

So what do we do with it? At least part of the answer is that we can't stop with Joshua. And we certainly can't read it as an instruction manual. We must be willing to look in the mirror closely, to keep reading, keep going through the messy, difficult texts, and be like Jacob, wrestling with God, as we embrace the whole of scripture—the whole story of God who ultimately loves the whole world, and is always inviting us into true and deep and sacred relationship. What will we choose?

Reflection Questions

- * Rahab speaks the truest theological word in the book from the position least expected. Who in your life has spoken a true word about God from a place society or the church told you not to expect it?
- * Joshua doesn't assume the people will choose rightly. The invitation is real, which means the risk is real. What is the difference between faith that is freely chosen and faith that is simply inherited or performed?
- * After sitting with one of scripture's most contested books, what is your honest relationship to this text now? What has shifted, and what remains unresolved?

SERMON NOTES