

Be Strong

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[0 : 0 0] if you have just joined us for the first time tonight or it's been a while since you've been here we've been working through the early chapters of Joshua in the Old Testament last week we're in chapter 7 tonight we're in chapter 8 and chapter 7 was a brutal story of God's judgment and chapters 7 and 8 go together as one story and so basically what that means is we're back into blood and guts territory again tonight as we have just heard as James read out to us all the people of Ai are slaughtered 12,000 men and women are slaughtered it's a it's a massacre and on one level we're kind of used to massacres to a degree I mean we live in a in a world that as I read just very recently that since the end of World War II conflicts have trebled in number around our world and all sorts of things like you know Kenya and Syria and Somalia and just massacred hundreds of people dying all over the place and so on one level we're used to massacres even though we're repulsed by them but what makes this one particularly hard is that God is caught up in at all it's actually in fact on his orders and so the question that we have of texts like this as we did last week and Chris alluded to this is what sort of God does that make him that I think is the struggle that we have with this text the early sections of Joshua with the conquest of the land of Canaan what sort of God is this well the the prominent atheist the tele-evangelist for atheism

Richard Dawkins has a little doubt on what sort of God this is he describes him in his book the God delusion on page 31 as the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction a jealous and proud of it a petty unjust unforgiving control freak a vindictive bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser a misogynist homophobic racist infantile genocidal filocidal pestilential megalomaniacal sadomasochistic capriciously malevolent bully there's a whole lot of adjectives that are thrown together there some of which don't appear in the dictionary and it's the what Dawkins Dawkins's problem is that he he knows what he thinks God is like the God of the Old Testament and Dawkins's problem is not trying to understand God which is what we're trying to do here tonight Dawkins's problem is trying to understand people who try to understand God that's his problem and so this is just you know when you read that you hear that sort of stuff you think he's gone way over the top he's in fact offensive which is what he's deliberately trying to do in the God delusion he's trying to be offensive but as we face a chapter like this one that we're looking at here in in Joshua 8 however much we want to sort of back away from from a Dawkins and say that he's gone way over the top and we want to say that's in fact not my God we are still

I think in our modern context a little embarrassed about these sorts of chapters we're a little bit uncomfortable with these chapters in fact if we you know jumping in to read the Bible the first time with people we don't normally suggest you start at places like Joshua we go with more sort of you know the birth of Jesus and work through the Gospels a year ago sorry a number of years ago a lady I know rejected Christianity she'd become a Christian a couple of years earlier threw herself into the life of the church and she rejected Christianity on the basis of reading Joshua 7 and 8 for the very first time and she did that preparing for a Sunday school lesson and I remember her coming to me what kind of God does this that's the question I think behind many questions about God what kind of God is he and surprisingly

Joshua 7 and 8 don't just raise I think the question for us but actually come up with some of the answers too if you were here last week then you would have had like Joshua gone through the chilling episode of Achan sin in the camp the greed the theft the rejection of God's commands the exposure the humiliation the execution the pile of rocks and the burning of the bodies and and Joshua I think you know might have been wondering at that point who's next in fact what's next as Chris said it was good news up to that point victory after victory victory and all of a sudden boom this this encounter which just gutted the people of God and so the opening of chapter 8 is remarkably comforting and reassuring God says to Joshua do not be afraid do not be discouraged

and the Lord said that to Joshua because understandably he was afraid he was discouraged what kind of God orders this after the events of chapter 7 perhaps he was wondering if God in fact was still angry with him you might know that feeling Chris in fact start off last week you know what it is to have someone really angry with you you remember that feeling someone really angry with you and what I find is not so much the person getting angry with me but it's the after effect it's the someone gets angry with you and you have that feeling of uncertainty every time you see them that maybe there's probably still that grudge there they've still got that issue with you they're brooding over the anger that is the feeling that the anger just continues and continues and continues and I suspect that my kids experience that for me sometimes I get angry with them about something and then you just can tell by the way they approach you afterwards for some time as to is dad safe is he still angry with me and you've got to kind of you know give them reassurance that it's all dealt with and stuff like that

I think that we often talk in terms of three strikes and you're out make three mistakes and that's the end of the road for you and sometimes we even operate like that spiritually as if God is a one strike and you're out kind of God and so after the disaster in the judgment of chapter 7 God makes it clear that he's not that kind of God at all his anger with the death of Achan his anger is actually turned away and so he approaches his people with reassurance he's a God of grace he's a God of the second chance the you know 22nd chance of the 2222nd chance and so on and so on he is the God who embraces his people in spite of the mistakes and the sins and the flaws he's the God who delivers on his promise in spite of his people not deserving that promise his anger was satisfied with the death of Achan and now he brings a word of comfort and reassurance his generosity in his goodness and his grace is seen in fact in verse 1 as we continue on take the whole army with you and go up and attack Ai for I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai his people his city and his land you shall do to Ai and as king as you did to Jericho and his its king except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves see what they're saying if only Achan had waited there was no need for the greed and the coveting of Jericho he could have freely enjoyed all of God's provision at Ai in Dale Ralph Davis's commentary on Joshua he has this intriguing phrase he uses to reflect on these verses he calls it serpent theology he's picking up the image of the serpent the devil in Genesis 3 and serpent theology is thinking about God the way that the devil thinks about God as opposed to the way that God has revealed himself to us and part of sinful serpent theology is to put our attention on

[8 : 45] God's restrictions rather than his generous provision and that's what happens in Genesis chapter 3 in the garden of Eden the serpent's word to Eve do you remember it did God really say that you must not eat of any tree of the garden well no that's not what God said at all but the devil wanted Eve and he wants us to imagine that that's exactly what God said he focuses on our attention on what we can't do or what we shouldn't do as Christians rather than all that we enjoy as God's people have you found yourself borrowing serpent theology at all it's the theology that paints God as a killjoy it puts the spotlight on the restrictions it it blinds us to the God who generously provides it ignores the beauty and the wonder and the provision and the perfection of the garden of Eden and it takes your attention off that and focuses on one restriction do not eat from the fruit of that tree

Achan would have had every need met if only he had trusted every word that proceeded from the mouth of God and obediently waited but he didn't God never seeks to impoverish his people it is only as his people lose sight of his generosity his provision his goodness that the cancer of covetedness consumes them I actually think that recognizing God as a giving God is the prerequisite for our faithfulness we need to understand that he's a giving generous merciful God it's a prerequisite to faithfulness contentment with God's goodness is our antidote for faithlessness so what kind of God are you we can see he is a generous and he's a merciful God notice too that he is a sovereign God God's sovereignty is wonderfully displayed throughout this chapter he's the he's the one with all the battle plans he gives all the orders and yet it feels quite different than Jericho Jericho seemed more like a miracle than than Ai if you like it begins with God's instruction in verse 2 set an ambush behind the city and then you watch all of

Joshua's actions from chapter from verse 3 to 17 it is a classic lure and ambush strategy Joshua hides a bunch of blokes behind the city to set a trap and he grabs the rest of the blokes with him marches up to the front door knocks on the front door they open it blows some raspberries ticks them off they grab their army they come off after him and he retreats and they think oh this is

fantastic we've just beaten the Israelites and we're gonna do it again so let's finalize the deal and they send out everyone against the Israelites and it leaves the city open and vulnerable and then we come to God's next instruction to Joshua in verse 18 hold out towards Ai the javelin that is in your hand for into your hand I will deliver the city so that's Joshua what he does he holds this stick this spear over there that's it that's the signal does his instruction it's the signal springs the trap defeats the king the army in the city of Ai and when you read the story you notice that God is as every little bit as much in control and work here as he was in Jericho what kind of God is he he's a sovereign powerful God with the power of God the great Jericho could be taken without it the people of God couldn't even take the little outpost of Ai how utterly dependent his people are upon him upon his generosity and his power so he's a God of generosity and goodness he's a God of sovereignty and power and so now we come back to let's deal with the elephant in the room it's hard to be to not notice God's awesome and destructive judgment in this chapter there is no denying it this this reads like a terrible massacre verse 24 when Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them and when every one of them had beaten put uh been put to the sword all the Israelites to return to Ai and killed those who were in it 12,000 men and women fell that day all the people of Ai all of Ai are dead and it's God it's people who are doing it under the orders of God what kind of God are you that's the question that question is an enormous question and frankly we do not have the time to sit here and to go through it all so I'm going to encourage you to buy a book called The God I Do Not Understand by Chris Wright um it has a couple of very helpful chapters that addresses um several of the questions that people ask and addresses specifically the conquest of Canaan very very helpful little book um there uh just as an advertisement point over here uh there's not many hard copies available but which is unusual for a book that was so helpful and it was only published in 2009 but there are e-book versions so you tech savvy people you can go to Kurong download the reader if you haven't got the reader and buy the book very very helpful alternatively if you are a small group leader here tonight or you're particularly turned up about this question um I've got two copies of the relevant chapters right here two copies uh put them all together yesterday really really helpful stuff so if you're a small group leader and you're actually going through the book of Joshua um come and grab a copy or uh Chris can send you or I can send you an electronic version

it's it's substantial reading but it is very very very helpful reading about trying to understand what's happening in the Canaan context but I'll just mention one thing to help us understand what's happening here there is a backstory a behind the scenes story to Joshua 7 and 8 and the clue comes for us surprisingly in verse 29 where we read that Joshua hung the body of the king of Ai on a tree now there is more to that act than just mere intimidation and gloating over a military victory Joshua knows his bible and the significance of what he's actually doing here he would have known the words in Deuteronomy 22 that say if a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree you must not leave his body on the tree overnight which is why Joshua took it down and they buried it be sure to bury him that same day because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse in other words what's happening in this conquest is God's judgment it is his curse divine judgment is being enacted here now that doesn't make it any less violent or any nicer but it does change the moral context it changes the framework or the lens through which we view this chapter if you dig back further you realise that not only is this

God's judgment on the sins of these people sins that range from sexual perversion to child sacrifice but it's a judgment that's been a long time coming you see a bit over 400 years before this is happening Abraham lived here he lived in this place called Canaan and he was told by God when he lived there that he would be the father of a nation he was told that his descendants would be slaved and mistreated in a foreign land for 400 years and then God would bring them back and that they would conquer this land the promised land and he was also told this Genesis 15 verse 16 in the fourth generation your descendants will come back here for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure see what it's saying there 400 years earlier God acknowledged the sinfulness of the Amorites and he could have judged them at that particular moment but he didn't their sin had not yet exhausted God's patience and yet over 400 years the sin didn't stop another 400 years of sinning and defying and exploiting ignoring all the warnings before God said that's enough and judgment fell so what kind of God what kind of God are you?

[18:30] well the king of Ai and that pile of rocks over his body in verse 29 reminds us that he's a God who's not to be trifled with he's not a God to be messed around with he's not a God that we deal with him on our terms he is a God who delivers on his promise to bring not just mercy but

justice to and so here's another bit of serpent theology that often infects our minds it's the thinking that God won't do what he says he will do again remember chapter 3 of Genesis in the garden of Eden the serpent tempting Eve to take and eat for the fruit and she remembers the warning of disobedience you will surely die and the serpent mocks it out no you won't you won't die don't believe it God will not hold you accountable and the getting kicked out of the garden of Eden and that pile of rocks in chapter 8 verse 29 reminds us that God does in fact hold sin accountable and that he will judge and that he expects every word that proceeds from his mouth to be obeyed what kind of God have you he's not a safe one it is unwise to mistake

God's patience for weakness or for lack of resolve don't make the mistake of thinking he hasn't and so he won't or I've got away with it and so I will get away with it don't make that mistake but I think there's some in terms of the back story here there's a little bit more for us as Christians as Christians reading a chapter like this we tend to put ourselves in the Israelite shoes we tend to identify with God's people looking to step into their inheritance of all of God's promises and if we're not careful it can lead us to a smug or even a patronizing complacency you know I'm part of the people of God that's good for me but boo to everyone else we're the good guys while they over there whoever they are are in fact the bad guys and they deserve this but that's not what this chapter is teaching it's not what the back story teaches us either listen to

Deuteronomy chapter 9 after the Lord your God has driven them out before you that is you've gone into the land and driven out all the inheritance of Canaanites king of I all those of Jericho after the Lord has driven them out before you do not say to yourself the Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness no it is on account of the wickedness of these nations the Lord is going to drive them out before you it is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of the land but on account of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God will drive them out before you to accomplish what he swore to your fathers to Abraham Isaac and Jacob understand then he says it again that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord or your God is giving you this good land to possess for you are a stiff neck people why is it happening it's not because they're worse than the people of God it's not because

Israel's any better God isn't a God of favourites he isn't a God who turns a blind eye to our faults and failures either and so these chapters must be set in the context of God's promises his sovereignty his mercy his justice these chapters are not as they have been used in the past they are not a legitimising of war or of religious terrorism or of ethnic cleansing that is not what they are and this is why this chapter ends the way it does it doesn't end so much with the awesome judgment of God as with the humbling words of God and so you move from 29 terrible picture of rocks being piled up over Achan just being killed and then all of a sudden there's a shift into verse 30 it's a massive shift one minute you're in a fast moving born you know movie with lots of action and adventure and the next year watching him appraise it's like what happened there it's an abrupt shift in verse 29 we're standing at the gates of Ai rocks piled over the king verse 30 we're 30 odd kilometres north of Ai in the shadow of Mount

Ebal near Shechem as they participate in a ceremony of covenant renewal and the hearing of the blessing and cursing of the law it is significant that the covenant renewal ceremony is held right there in Shechem at the foot of Mount Ebal it was here in that place that Abraham first received the promise of the land from God and it was here in that place that Jacob returned safely after a long exile from the land that he had been promised and so now here in Joshua 8 it's Abraham's seed it's the family of Jacob at promised place experiencing God's promise of the land at the very least what we're to hear from that is that time does not in any sense invalidate God's promises promises he is true to his promise the climax of the ceremony comes with

[24 : 32] Joshua's reading of the law and everything that happens in verses 30 to 35 Moses has previously commanded Israel to do all the details Joshua follows every detail right down to the letter even the place they deliberately went there for this ceremony of covenant renewal it's like they needed to go from Sydney to Brisbane but they went via Perth because it's a really important thing they needed to do in Perth notice how the text emphasizes that all the word of the law was applicable to all the people all is used five times in verses 33 to 35 the Israelite the foreign of the leadership the rank and file were all meant to be ruled by the word of God what's the point given who God is covenant obedience is more important than military victory that's what

God really desires of his people heeding God's word is more important than fighting God's war obedience to the word of God is more important than a whole flurry and commitment to ministry activity Israel's success as the people of God does not primarily consist in knocking off Canaanites but in everyone's total submission to the word of God that's where success will be for the people of God a lesson that was brutally experienced for them by Achan all the people must give all obedience to all the word of God that is the first priority for the people of God and this is true for the visitor in the midst as well as for the God's people it includes men and women it includes children and foreigners this is an all age and all comers service at

Mount Ebal verses 34 and 35 say that Joshua did not leave anything out in reading the word of the Lord he didn't stick to his favorite bits and he didn't sort of say things like well that's not suitable for the children the children heard all of God's curses as much as they heard his blessings and the foreigners heard at the same time that they too could have a place in God's blessing as well it didn't have to be all about it didn't have the result for them didn't have to be like it was for Ai God's word keeps us humble it shows the foreigner how they can in fact be safe with the people of God in the promises and the blessings of God and it shows the people of God how not to take that safety for granted God's word keeps us humble and so what kind of God are you he's a God of extraordinary generosity what kind of God are you he's a God of justice unlike us he isn't a

God who draws the line on his justice he doesn't have favorites to whom he turns a blind eye to to their sin as Achan found out and Israel will soon find out very soon what kind of God are you a God who can be trusted to keep his word whether that's a word of blessing how do we square that up because if it was me I wouldn't do it like this you know we're all drunk peasants we fall off one side of the donkey or the other because God keeps it together he can hold all those character traits together competing traits are sovereign promise keeping God of justice and mercy who holds people accountable well thousands of years after Joshua another king was hung on a tree this time it wasn't the king of Ai it was the king of the Jews the promised messiah king of God and Jesus willingly placed himself under God's curse not for his sin but for our sin in fact for the sin of the world he did it not because we are righteous but because we are wicked not because we deserve God's blessing but because he longs for us to enjoy God's blessing in spite of who we are and what we've done and the only way we can enjoy God's blessing is to identify with the king who took the curse of God that we deserved psalm psalm 2 read it this morning summarizes the message of ai's defeat so memorably therefore you kings be wise be warned you rulers of the earth serve the lord with fear rejoice with trembling kiss the son lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way for his wrath can flare up in a moment blessed are all who take refuge in him the same son is the one whose anger and wrath can pour out in just a moment and yet he's a place of refuge and safety the glorious reality is that we can take refuge in him because he hung on a tree for us outside of the city that good

[30 : 09] Friday afternoon and because he took our place he atoned for our sins and carried our guilt we do not have to face the fate of the king of Ai which is what we deserve that is how serious our sin is we are meant to look at that pile of stones in chapter 8 verse 29 and say that should be my end we're meant to look at the cross of Christ which let me be frank that should revile us as a massacre in the same way these chapters should revile us as a massacre the cross of Christ was a massacre on an innocent individual and we should see that cross and we should see the seriousness of our sin and the awesome justice of

God to think of ourselves in any other way regardless of how long we've been a Christian or how much we've served and contributed to the church or how much money we give is to be too busy fighting our war to listen to the word of God and yet the same cross that reveals the awesome justice of God is the cross that reveals the incredible patience and goodness and generosity of God as the just anger of God is poured out on the Lord Jesus in such a way that God's anger towards us is satisfied and the death of the Lord Jesus turns God's anger away from us so that with no malice no grudges he can say things to us like do not be afraid do not be discouraged my friends being a Christian is not about playing spiritual games it's not about having a spare time religious interest called Christianity it demands the whole of our being that's what we see at the end of Joshua 8 covenant obedience covenant commitment we cannot declare allegiance to Christ and then go on living in disobedience which is exactly what I can did because the two attitudes are in fact mutually exclusive but if we seek to live in obedience although we will often fail and we will fall if our lives are characterized by repentance and trust and obedience God is with us as the old song goes there's

no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey this God is committed to those who trust and obey him even though he's a God who's not to be trifled with and his promised victories and blessings will become ours because that's the sort of God he actually is God there's God Thank you.