

DEVOTED TO GOD

Joshua 6:17

“And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction.” God gave this command to the people of Israel through Joshua as they began their seven days of marching around the city of Jericho. We later read then on the seventh day when they finished circling the city seven times:

So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.

“Devoted,” is our translation. But it translates a word in Hebrew that is unique to God. Here are some examples of its use:

Deuteronomy 20:17 also names six people groups who were to be subject to this: the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

Judges 19–21 tells us the Israelite town of Jabesh-Gilead was “devoted” for not joining in battle against the Tribe of Benjamin.

Saul “devoted” priestly town of Nob, nearly wiping out the priestly House of Eli.

In 1 Samuel 15, where Saul “devoted” the Amalekites with the sword, but spared their king and kept "the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good." For this, Saul is rebuked by Samuel, who reminds him that God had commanded him to "completely destroy" the Amalekites.

“Devoted” is the last word of the Old Testament when Malachi 4:6 says, "... lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

God commanded not just the conquering of these places, but the destruction of the people. Today we would call it genocide. When Saul spared some of Amalek,

he not only got into trouble, he was told by Samuel that he would lose his crown. It seems like he was getting into trouble for being merciful.

The concept of “devoted” is used by many to declaim Scriptures and say that God is cruel and barbaric. Others try to get around it by saying it is from the Old Testament, but they embrace just the New Testament and the love and acceptance of Jesus.

This was a hard concept for me to talk about until our weekly women’s study went over a book. One chapter was dedicated just to the concept of “devoted.” How could a God of love command genocide? The book did it this way:

Daniel was a vibrant 16-year-old who played soccer and basketball, played trombone in the band, and did well in school work. But one week he noticed that he had a hard time keeping up in basketball practice. His mom took him to the doctor. The doctor wasn’t sure, but ordered some tests. The tests showed it might be cancer.

Daniel had an appointment with a cancer doctor (cancer doctors are called “oncologists”). That doctor ordered more tests. When he visited with Daniel and his parents, he told them, “This is very serious. There is a chance to beat this, but first we must put you through a tough time.”

Daniel went through chemotherapy. He lost his hair. He became nauseous so often that he lost a lot of weight. He had pains everywhere. He asked the doctor about this. The doctor told him, “I am sorry, but this is only going to get worse. It is almost like we have to kill you to beat this.” Daniel spent most of his waking time in pain. Why did he have to go through this?

God called the people of Israel to conquer the land of Canaan which He had promised to their Father Abraham. But the Canaanites stood in the way, not so much because they controlled the land, but even more because they were an evil barrier to God’s people. Their idolatry involved the sacrifice of infants and young maidens and farmers having sexual relationships with so-called “sacred” prostitutes. We see their evil in what happened when Israelites lived among them instead of destroying them as God had commanded. The Israelites picked up their idolatry and forsook God. They began to fight among each other. Their kingdom became divided. The rich bought out the land of the poor and turned them into slaves. They grew further and further from God.

The doctor told Daniel. “We now have to try a chemo that will be tougher. It will not be fun, but this is what we need to do to destroy the cancer.” He was right. As bad as it was before for Daniel, this was worse.

As bad as it might seem for God to declare that Jericho and other places were devoted to Him, it was necessary to rid the evil in front of His people. As they followed God’s commands under Joshua, they kept close to God. But after that, they let the evil go on. It grew to take over them and lead to first the destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria in 722 BC, then the south and Jerusalem in 586.

But Daniel held on and continued the treatment. Then the doctor told him the tests showed that the cancer was decreasing. It would be easy to let up and stop the chemo, but the cancer could come back even worse. So the treatment continued. Daniel still suffered, but the cancer shrunk and shrunk.

Israel failed to devote to God what He commanded them to do. In the first place, He created everything, so He can do whatever He wants with it. But so much more God loved His people and did not want them sucked into the idolatry that encouraged adultery, cheating, corruption, and murder. Yet, God did not stop. What the people of Israel failed to do, God did by killing not Canaanites, but all sin in the killing of His Son, Christ Jesus.

People ask how a good God could command the death of people like the Canaanites. But we are so selective in our concerns. We get upset, and rightly so, by the death of Palestinians, but ignore the many more who have been killed in Yemen. We use our social media to fight climate change or illegal immigration, but fail to realize how people work like slaves in Africa to mine the special metals needed for our microchips. If we set God to our standards, then God just wipes out most of humanity who we ignore. Instead God, who by His standards should wipe out all humanity to remove evil, sacrificed His own Son instead.

That is why we don’t spread the Gospel of Jesus using violence, political power, or force. God rescues people from sin by the power of His love in Jesus, not by force. But the whole world is “devoted” to Him. Jesus made it that way by His death. Jesus will come again and God will destroy not just Canaanites or Hivites, but all who oppose Him. And all who have been brought to faith in Jesus will be joined with Him forever.