

“All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

All scripture is God-breathed. How about that one? That passage that Serene just read for us is in the Bible.

Joshua totally destroyed all the people who live in the land. Is that God-breathed? Is that useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness?

The Book of Joshua contains some of the hardest questions in the entire Bible, in my view. Questions about violence in the name of God, that God would command people to commit the things that he does.

How is Joshua God-breathed and how is it useful for us? What are we supposed to do? How do we see Christ in Joshua?

You know, Thomas Jefferson famously used to cut out with a pair of scissors the parts of his Bible that he didn't agree with. All of the miracles, he just chopped out, including the resurrection. So is that what we should do?

Pull out your scissors and just chop out the Book of Joshua. No. All scripture is God-breathed.

What about the technique that we're probably more tempted to do, which is just to avoid reading Joshua? Let's just spend our time in the Gospels and forget about those parts of the Bible that we don't like. Again, all scripture is God-breathed.

If we're looking for an easy journey, even the Gospels have some hard questions in them. What if we just kind of pretend that they're not really problems and we gloss over our eyes and we say that it's fine?

I think we're meant to read these parts of the Bible and have our moral conscience pricked, because it shows that God has done something in us. So how are we supposed to approach this part of the Bible, the Book of Joshua, as Serene has read for us?

I'm convinced the best thing to do is to face it head on, to read the Bible, to ask good questions, and to find good responses. So that's what we're going to do this morning, because we believe that all scripture is God-breathed and is useful.

My goal today is not to provide perfect, easy answers for why and how we should read the Book of Joshua. That is not my goal. My goal this morning, my single goal, is much more modest and I think more achievable.

My goal is that we might read deeply the Book of Joshua and hold on to our faith at the same time.

I think when it comes to some of the hardest questions in life, such as the suffering question, how they could be so much hurt in this world, how God could command people to do the things he does, it's too lofty a goal to try and answer those big

questions. But there are good ways that we can hold on to our faith at the same time as asking these questions.

So that's my goal this morning, that we might see God's breath in the Book of Joshua, that we might see Christ in Joshua because all scripture is God-breathed and is useful. So that's worth praying for, for this task.

PRAYER

Let me pray. Father, we have come to your word. It is the authority in all matters of our life.

We're grateful for the gift that it is, that we can read it and understand it. But Lord, we confess, we find it so hard sometimes to understand your word and how it fits together.

So Spirit of Truth, the one who was given to us last week at Pentecost as we celebrated, would you illuminate the meaning of this scripture to us this morning for your glory? Amen.

SERIES CONTEXT

So we finished our May mission month. Last week was the final message of our Blessed to be a Blessing series. And we're back to our Christ in Scripture project.

If you haven't heard, Lord willing, we're going to spend a week in every book of the Bible over the next two years, seeing how that book points us to the person of Jesus and to his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

We are 1366th through the project, which is 20%. So we're doing pretty well, but we're going to aim to finish at the end of next year.

We've read through the Gospels, we've read through the Torah, we've done three out of eight of the general epistles, and we start this morning a series in the former prophets.

The former prophets are the, I think there's nine of them, the books which come straight after the Torah, but before the exile of Israel. That's why they're called the former prophets.

So for the next five weeks, we're going to look at Joshua, judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, and then we're going to have a breath of fresh air in the New Testament again in July.

We're in the former prophets series and this morning's message is Christ in Joshua.

Before we jump into this tricky book and ask how we might read it and hold on to our faith at the same time, I think it's worth doing a quick recap of the story so far.

I remember in Life Hub a couple of years ago, we were doing a series covering the story of the entire Bible, and we spent a lot of time every single night just on the recap at the start of the night.

Sometimes I or the others rolled their eyes like, oh, another recap.

But I came to realize that when you're doing biblical theology, which is what we're doing, that is studying the overarching story of the whole Bible, almost the most important thing you could do is recap.

Because the Bible, remember, is not technically one book, it's 66 books. It is a library of different types of literature. And so when we recap, we are seeing the overall story.

And so that this morning, we might kind of go up to the bookshelf of the Bible and take off Joshua. And we might see how Joshua fits into the span of the entire story. So, a recap of the story of the Bible, hopefully in less than a minute.

STORY OF THE BIBLE RECAP

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He put humankind in the garden to care for this planet and to rule over it. But human beings wanted to be like God and to define good and evil for themselves.

So, they rebelled against him. Therefore, the power of sin entered this world and infected everything. But God's project of creation would not be thwarted like that.

So, God chose one man called Abraham, and he said, I will bless you, I will multiply you, and I will set the world to rights through you. Therefore, Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob, Jacob had 12 sons who become the nation of Israel.

But Israel falls into slavery in Egypt. Therefore, God delivers them and gives them his law and dwells among them. But Israel rebel against God in the wilderness.

Therefore, for 40 years, they wander. But God is still faithful, and he leads Israel to the very cusp of the promised land by the end of Deuteronomy. That's the story of the Bible so far.

You might notice I told it in the framework of therefore and but. Every good story could be told in that way. I think it's helpful for us to understand that the Bible is full of therefores and buts.

Something happens either in continuity without expectation, therefore, or in discontinuity without expectation. But the entire story of the Bible can be told like this, which brings us to the Book of Joshua.

Joshua is the story of Israel under Joshua's leadership. In verse 1, after the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, son of none, Moses' aid, the Book of Joshua.

Then we go to the next book of the Bible, which is Judges, and we read this in verse 1. After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites?

The Book of Joshua is his leadership from start to finish, not his birth, because he's born back in Exodus, but his leadership until his death. The first half of the Book of Joshua is the tricky part.

That's where Israel actually take the promised land. They cross the Jordan River, all of the conquest, Jericho, that whole thing. The second half of Joshua is Joshua divvying up the land, so that the 12 tribes might have their allotment.

The first half is where most of our problems lie, how God could command his people to do the things that he commanded them to do, is in the passage that Serene read for us.

Again, I'm not aiming to solve that problem, but to help us hold on to our faith as we read the Book of Joshua. So, how to read Joshua and keep your faith. Remember genre, justice, scale, agency and delay.

These five things are helpful for us to keep in mind when we read dark parts of the Bible.

1 — GENRE

Firstly, how to read Joshua and keep your faith. Number one, genre. You know, genre is a French word which means type of literature.

Actually, I think it means gender. Any French speakers can confirm that? Kathleen is not here.

I'll ask her tonight. I think genre is the French word for gender, but it means type of literature. And when we think about genre, it's helpful to realize that different genres have different rules of interpretation.

So, I'll say a couple of pieces of literature and you tell me what the genre is. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Star Wars, so science fiction.

Once upon a time, fairy tale, the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. Biology textbook. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

Poems, song of songs, poetry. Each of those four different types of literature and the countless other types have different rules of interpretation.

So if we were to go to the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell and think this is fictional, it's a moral, it's like a fairy tale, it's not real, we would be very not helped in learning what the powerhouse of the cell is.

Likewise, if we were to go to Star Wars and pull out our notebooks and say, okay, so Emperor Palpatine rules from AD 41. It's not real. It's a story, it's fictional, but it's, I mean, there's truth in Star Wars, but it is not true.

Different rules for different genres. The way that this is helpful is to realize that in the Bible, there is a genre that is the Book of Joshua. It's a subset of historical narrative called battle accounts.

And we see this genre in the Bible, in Joshua and other places, but also in Egyptian literature and other ancient Near Eastern literature. And the main characteristic of battle accounts is over-exaggeration to make a point.

So we read in Joshua 10 verse 40, Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors.

He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel had commanded. Now, we read that and we rightly ask very good questions about how that could be in the Bible, how God could command such a thing.

But it's a genre characterized by over exaggeration to make a point. What we see in the second half of Joshua is precisely the opposite of what that says.

Part of the entire plot conflict of the Bible is that Israel did not wipe out all the people from the land. For instance, 15 verse 63, Judah could not dislodge the Jebusites who were living in Jerusalem. To this day, they still live there.

16 verse 10, Manasseh and Ephraim did not dislodge. 17 verse 12, the Manassehites were not able to occupy these towns, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that region.

There's a lot of passages in the second half of Joshua and judges that say that Israel did not wipe out every living thing. It's a genre of over exaggerated detail to make a point. And what is the point that Joshua makes?

It's about the faithfulness of God. We read in Joshua 21, the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors and they took possession of it and settled there.

The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them. Again, factually not true, because we read from the other parts of Joshua.

But the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one of the Lord's good promises to Israel failed. Every one was fulfilled.

The point of this genre, the point of Joshua is to highlight the faithfulness of God to his promise. Do you remember back in Genesis 12, God promised Abram four things, a name, a nation, blessing and land.

And by this point in the story, almost all of those promises have come true except the land. And so, here comes the Book of Joshua to show how God is going to be faithful to his promise. It's helpful for us to remember the genre.

2 – JUSTICE

Secondly, how to read Joshua and keep your faith. Remember genre and remember justice. The Canaanites living in the promised land that Joshua conquers were evil.

They were a wicked people. Part of what is happening in Joshua is that God is faithful to his promise, but that same story told from a different view is God is bringing justice on wicked people living in the land.

So Genesis 15 verse 16, God says to Abraham, in the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here to the promised land. For the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.

The Amorites were one of the people living in the land. God is saying that they are wicked and evil and will only continue to be so. Deuteronomy 12 tells us that these people sacrificed their children to their gods.

God hates child sacrifice. It says it again and again in the prophets. Leviticus chapter 18, the Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, I am the Lord your God.

You must not do as they do in Egypt where you used to live. And you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices.

And then if you know Leviticus 18, which I didn't really before this because it's Leviticus, what follows that verse is a very long list of all the things that they are not to do which the people in the land do.

In fact, it says do not have sexual relations with, and then it lists almost every single type of person that you could have sexual relations with in your family, not with your brother or your sister or your brother's wife or your father's wife or

your mother's husband, every single person. But the combination at the end of Leviticus 18 is, do not defile yourselves in any of these ways because this is how the nations that I'm going to drive out before you became defiled.

Even the land was defiled, so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. The point is that the Canaanites were evil, and God had to bring justice on them. Child sacrifice and moral corruption is what required God's justice.

Now, we don't want to live in a world without justice. We don't want to live in a world that is morally unaccountable.

We don't want to live in a country or a planet or a universe where people can commit the atrocities of human history and get away with it. We want justice to prevail, and the good news is that God is just.

He brings judgment against evil, and that's part of what is happening in the Book of Joshua. God is bringing justice against evil. He's bringing judgment against those who sacrifice their children and who do other wicked things.

So remember justice. Remember that the Canaanites were evil and it was part of God's mercy and his justice.

3 – SCALE

How to read Joshua and keep your faith. Remember genre, justice, and number three, scale. Scale, agency and delay, they kind of go together.

So we'll talk about them pretty quickly. We want God to be just against evil, don't we? We don't want to live in a world where evil people can get away with it.

We also see from the Bible that the Canaanites were wicked and deserving of God's justice.

But when we read the Book of Joshua, even if we agree that God is just and we agree that the Canaanites were evil, our moral conscience is still kind of pricked by the way that God administered his justice. Why did it have to be done like this?

Was there no other way? Well, I wonder if this might be a helpful way to think about it. Remember Cain and Abel.

This is the first murder in human history, the first murder in the Bible. Cain murders his brother Abel, and it says in Genesis 4, I think, that the blood of Abel cries out to God from the ground, crying for justice.

And so God rightly brings justice on Cain. Remember Cain is exiled as a foreigner and a wanderer for his whole life. Now, I don't think anyone reads the story of Cain and Abel and thinks that Cain was hard done by.

He received justice for murder. When it comes to one person, we agree, God should be just and visit the consequence of a person upon their sin. So here's the thing.

What if the scale was different? We agree that God should be just to one person, but what if the scale was increased to one nation? Is it any different?

Maybe it's different in some ways, but God is still just in condemning the wickedness of a nation. Just as just as he is in condemning the wickedness of one person. As the scale increases, God is still just.

We live today in a highly individualistic society. I think we know that. Our kind of sense of justice is probably oriented around me and my rights and my restrictions.

But the ancient world that Joshua was written in was highly communal, where justice was seen as a communal thing. And so as God brings his justice on the peoples who were living in the land, it was justice against the wickedness of the people.

And this is the culture that the Bible was written in. So remember scale. It's good for God to judge and to bring justice on a whole nation.

How to read Joshua and keep your faith.

4 — AGENCY

Remember genre, justice, scale, and agency. God is just in judging the evil of this world. And he does that on the scale of a whole nation.

But another kind of question that we have when we read Joshua is, why God did that judgment through the people of Israel? When you think about the Bible, there's all these stories of people dying instantly. It's brutal.

Ananias and Sapphira, when they lie about selling the property and giving all the money in the Book of Acts. Lot's wife, she turns to a pillar of salt when she looks back.

The Bible is full of stories of individual people being directly judged by God for the wicked things they do.

And generally, we don't have a massive problem about that, because God is God, and this person has done something that is deserving of justice.

The problem with Joshua is that God's judgment does not fall straight from God to the people, but through the agency of Israel. God uses the people of Israel to affect his justice on a wicked people.

And so it's helpful for us to remember the agency, that it is God's just project. The Book of Joshua is not a human kind of reclaimed the land project. It is God's work of justice through the agency of Israel.

That's helpful to remember.

5 — DELAY

And the third piece of this kind of subset, how to read Joshua and keep your faith, this genre justice, scale agency and delay, is this idea that God is just in bringing his judgment at the end of time, but sometimes he brings that judgment into the

present without delay. We all agree that we want to live in a morally accountable universe where justice is served. And God promises that justice will be served at the end of the age.

But in Joshua, what we see is God bringing his just judgment into the present without delay. Genesis 15, well, I mean, I say without delay. There actually was a delay.

Genesis 15, in the fourth generation, God says, your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. So there is a delay.

God is allowing them time to repent or time for their wickedness to grow and be worthy of judgment. Do you remember the story of Jonah? Jonah's sermon that he preached to Nineveh, and he said, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

And what did Nineveh do? They repented. The entire city turned upside down, turned back to God, and God relented.

That could have happened for these people. God gave them a delay to repent, but ultimately they were unwilling. And so God brought his justice into the present.

The reason that God delays is for mercy. Peter says in the letter of 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 8, Do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. The reason God delays his justice is that we might turn to him in repentance.

But in this case, he waited long enough, and there was a time for justice. And he brought that upon the people of Canaan. Even still, these are hard questions.

I'm feeling the oxygen sucked out of the room. It's going to get light in a moment. These are really hard questions.

But even still, when God's justice comes on the people, it is not a unilateral destruction. Think of Rahab. She was a prostitute contributing to the moral corruption of the land.

She lived in Jericho, but she saw God's justice coming, and she aligned herself with God, and so she was saved. This is not the destruction of an entire people group, it's God's purpose being worked out.

In the very next chapter from, I think it's Joshua chapter 6, the Rahab story, the next chapter, we see a man called Akan, who is not a woman, a gentle woman, who's a sinful person like a prostitute, who is a Jewish male, supposedly clean.

He disobeys God and he is judged. What we see in putting these two stories together is, it's not the people of God versus all other people, it's God's purpose. It's those who align with Yahweh or those who don't.

And whether you're in the people of God or outside, if you align yourself with God and His purpose, then mercy comes. That's what the story of Rahab and Achan teaches us.

So remember, there is a delay that God's mercy, in His mercy, He allows us to come to Him. But there is a day when justice falls. Do you remember, Jesus said that no one knows the day or hour when He will return.

That's why we want to be always ready, because He will show up in the middle of the night when we're not ready. So we want to be ready to see Him. We want to be repentant in our hearts before Him, because He will not always delay His justice.

Genre, justice, scale, agency and delay. I know that that does not answer the problems that the Book of Joshua raises. But I told you from the start, I wasn't trying to answer them.

I'm trying to help us have something of a framework to hold on to our faith and to genuinely read the Book of Joshua. And I hope that that's been helpful.

CONCLUSION

Let's finish with something light. As Jack likes to say in our Ponder recordings, a palette cleanser. All scripture is guard-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

So what can Joshua teach us? Once we have kind of responded to these hard questions, what can we be instructed by in the Book of Joshua? Will we see that God is faithful to his promise?

We can cling to that. Nothing will separate us from God achieving his purpose in our lives and in our cosmos. We see the justice of God against evil.

And that is a good thing that those who commit evil receive the punishment that they are deserving of. Of course, that is us, apart from Christ. We see the sin of humanity that drives us to repentance.

These are some of the things that we can see in the Book of Joshua when we respond to these hard questions. So let me finish with the way that Joshua finishes. Chapter 24, verse 15.

If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you were living.

But as for me, Joshua says, as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. That is a great invitation for us. If these hard questions drive you away from God, and they can, that's a really real thing that happens to us.

If serving the Lord seems undesirable for you, then go and find a better answer out there apart from God.

I do not think that you will find a better answer to the fundamental problem that is in our universe than the answer that God gives us in the Bible.

Even with the dark parts of this story, it is good that God is just and will bring judgment upon this world one day. And it is good that Christ came on our behalf to take that judgment on himself, that we might have eternal life.

And so these words that Joshua says, sort of his famous last words, it's the same as what Moses said. Do you remember Moses' famous last words? Now choose life.

That's the same thing Joshua says. Choose this day who you will serve. Those gods, the ones out there, you want those answers?

Good luck with that. Good luck with finding meaning in suffering when there is no meaning behind the universe outside of God. But as for me and my household, as for we in this church, we will serve the Lord.

We will cling to him in worship. Peter said in John 6, Lord, to whom else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.

We've come to believe and to know that you're the holy one of God. May that be our heart. As we read these hard parts of the Bible, where else would we go?

Because even though the Bible is tricky, it points us to a God who is love and justice, and he was reconciling all things under Christ. So let's cling to him. Do you know what the name Joshua means?

God saves, do you know what the name Jesus means? God saves. Yeshua, in Hebrew, Joshua, God saves.

In Greek, it becomes Jesus. Matthew 1 verse 21, this is part of the angel visiting Mary. The angel says, she will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Joshua, in Hebrew, Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Where is Christ in Joshua? In this dark and tricky book, Christ in Joshua is the one who saves his people from their sins. That part, that dark part of the Bible points us to the saviour of the whole world, whose name is Jesus.

Because in Jesus, the faithfulness of God is magnified, the justice of God is satisfied, and the forgiveness of sins is extended to all who will repent and turn to him. Christ in Joshua is the one who saves us.

So let's hold on to our faith as we read Joshua, clinging to the one who saves us. As for me and my household, as for us in this church, we will serve the Lord. Amen.

Let me pray. Lord, we're thankful that we can bring ourselves before you with our honest questions and our wrestlings, that you're not scared of them.

We thank you that you are the light and the truth, and you will still be the truth even when we throw our questions at you. I pray for us as we have just spent a bit of time in Joshua, would you build our faith through this book?

Would you help us cling to your goodness and your faithfulness as we seek good answers to these questions? And above all, Lord, at this church, would we serve you wholeheartedly, Lord? Help us to be always ready.

Help us to stay faithful to not turn to other gods that don't provide good answers, but to serve you, because we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.