

“Understanding Herem Warfare”
Deuteronomy 7:1-26
February 9, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s chapter has about as many problems to modern readers as it does paragraphs. There is an extended section on God’s election of his people, and that poses problems for many. Then there are some verses where God promises health and wealth to his people, a promise that invites many questions. But the biggest problem in this chapter is its teaching about what is called *herem* warfare. That’s the Hebrew word that is something of a technical term for a particular type of warfare. It is translated in our text as “devote to complete destruction.” It is generally understood to refer to setting someone apart for God’s judgment. In this text, it is the residents of the land God had promised to his people who were so set apart for his judgment. And it was God’s plan for Israel to participate with him in this judgment. They were commanded to kill every resident of these lands, irrespective of age, and to destroy all their possessions. The earth would be wiped clean of them, as if they had never existed.

It needs to be pointed out that Deuteronomy describes and gives directions concerning two kinds of warfare. The *herem* warfare that occurs in this chapter is warfare conducted against the people who live in the land promised to Israel. Ordinary warfare is described in Deuteronomy 20:10-15, which applies to wars against cities and nations outside of the land promised to Israel. So *herem* warfare is unique and not normal. Nonetheless, it still leaves us with some questions. Upon first glance, herem warfare seems to describe the kind of genocide that we would all agree is worthy of our condemnation. Furthermore, how is this warfare compatible with the love of God that is so clearly spoken of elsewhere in the Bible?

I have talked to Christians who are embarrassed by passages such as this one, and by the description of the fulfilling of this in the book of Joshua. They just can’t reconcile this kind of warfare with most of the rest of the Bible. The temptation is just to skip such passages and hope no one ever asks us about them. I would propose that we should do just the opposite. It is often in the areas where God seems most puzzling and difficult that we eventually find him most precious. This chapter is like a Maryland blue crab, which I learned to eat when we lived there. Upon first seeing one, it’s hard to imagine that anything tasty could come out of it. You have to work hard and know where to look to find the meat. But once you do, it’s a delicious and sweet meat. In pursuit of the sweetness of this chapter, let’s explore this warfare.

I. Herem Warfare and the Judgment of God

The warfare of complete destruction that God commanded here was his judgment against those living in this land. We see that in verses 3-4 where Israel is told not to intermarry with the residents of the land lest they embrace the same gods as these other nations. If that were to happen, God says that his anger would be kindled against even Israel, with the result that they too would fall under his judgment and be destroyed.

Before going any further, there is an important clarification needed. It is clear from the rest of the Bible that this herem warfare in this form was limited to this time and this place. Jesus made that explicit in the Sermon on the Mount when he taught, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”** (Matt. 5:43-44). By the way, nowhere in the Bible does it say that we are to hate our enemies. That was something commonly believed in Jesus’ day, but not taught in the Bible. But Jesus says something new here in telling his hearers to love their enemies. And the specific enemy he has in mind are the Romans, the idolatrous Gentile nation currently occupying Israel. We know he has the Romans in mind because just two verses prior to this command to love our enemies he says, **“And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”** It would be a Roman soldier who would force such things. There were many in Jesus’ day who wanted to lead another herem war against these idolatrous Romans, thus restoring Israel as the holy land of God’s dwelling. Jesus ruled that out because he was doing something bigger.

To see what that bigger thing is that Jesus is doing, let’s go back to Deuteronomy 7 and its teaching that this herem war is God’s judgment against the idolatry of the land. That brings up another problem. Isn’t God being inconsistent here? Surely there were nations all across the earth that worshiped false gods but did not suffer this judgment of complete obliteration. Why the inconsistency? There is something of a parallel passage in Leviticus that helps us answer this. **“Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants”** (18:24-25). Did you notice the emphasis there upon the land? It was the land that became unclean and vomited out its inhabitants. And Israel is warned in this chapter as well as the previous one that if they went after other gods, God would **“destroy you from off the face of the earth”** (6:15). The same thing would happen to them as God tells them to do to the residents of this land. It says that the land became unclean and vomited out its inhabitants. Have you ever heard this region referred to as the “Holy Land”? There is a good reason for calling it that. It was carved out by God and said to be holy because in the Old Testament God decided to live in that land. The tabernacle of God, signifying the very presence of God with his people, would be located on this land. Since God was there, the

land was made holy. The existence of Israel in the Holy Land was intended by God to be a preview of his end game, his ultimate goal.

God's ultimate goal can be seen as early as Genesis 1. He created the man and the woman in his own image and directed them to multiply and fill the earth. God dwelled with them and gave them all things, so that their days were filled with the joy of walking with him. God's goal is to fill this earth with his image bearers who will experience the joy of walking with him. That goal seemed to be put forever beyond reach when Adam and Eve rebelled. But God did not let it go. In mercy, he decided to work with one man, Abraham, and his offspring. He would give to Abraham's descendants a land and would live with them there. And we learn from the New Testament that the existence of Israel in the land is not God's ultimate goal. He is at work creating a new people now, and will one day create a new earth and put his new people, the church, on that new earth. Eden will be restored.

This herem warfare must be seen in the context of the whole Bible, rather than viewed in an isolated manner. When seen in its larger context, we learn that this is a preview of the final, great judgment. There is a herem warfare to come, and Deuteronomy 7 is correctly read as a warning of that great judgment to come. One day God will declare holy the whole earth, and he will take up residence here. On that day, all who do not worship and love him alone will be wiped off the face of this new earth. Such ideas are seen today as cruel and antiquated. We prefer a God who winks at sin and who acts more like Santa Claus. But there is no such God. The true God is a holy God who judges sin and idolatry. This passage serves as a warning of a coming judgment. Such judgments are merciful, especially if there is a way out of judgment, which brings us to our next point.

II. Herem Warfare and the Love of God

Though the majority of verses in this chapter speak of this herem warfare, the heart of the chapter is the love of God for his people. At the heart of God's love for his people is this controversial doctrine of election. The holy God who will live in this holy land now chooses Israel to be his holy people who will live with him there. Such a vast privilege could easily lead to pride, and it is this doctrine of unconditional election that is designed to keep Israel humble. Why did God choose Israel? The temptation for Israel was to think it was because of something in them. Perhaps it was that they were the mightiest nation on the earth. God faced the task of finding just the right people to live with him in his holy land, and his eyes surveyed the whole earth to find the mightiest nation, and he found Israel. Moses refutes that idea. **“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all people”** (v. 7). Instead of being the mightiest, they were the weakest.

So perhaps God chose them because they were wealthier than other nations. The very next chapter discounts that notion (8:17-18). Or maybe it was their righteousness. They were just naturally more holy than all the other nations, with a gift in the area of religion. But God said, **“Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people”** (9:6). Why, then, did God choose them? **“It is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your father”** (v. 8). God chose them because he loves them. There could be no better foundation than that one. God’s choosing of his people is not based on anything in them, but something in him, his love. And since it is based on something in him, it can be secure. Israel did nothing to earn God’s love, and they can do nothing to lose God’s love.

But why is this passage about the love of God for his people surrounded by talk of God’s judgment? It shows us the logic of Scripture, in which the love of God and the judgment of God are not at odds with one another, but completely harmonious. God’s judgment is terrible and his love is great. We see that most clearly in the way the story unfolds from here. Israel had been warned that they too would become the victims of God’s herem warfare were they to abandon him and begin worshipping other gods. That’s exactly what happened, leading to their exile in Assyria and later Babylon. But God did not give up on his plan to live with a holy people in a holy land. Since his people proved themselves incapable of keeping the covenant God had established, he sent his own Son to keep it in their place. And since he could not deny his holiness, the penalty for their sin had to be satisfied, a satisfaction that once more was made by Jesus. He became the victim of herem warfare in our place. It is in Jesus alone that sense can be made out of this passage. How could a God of such staggering love also be a God of such staggering judgment? Only in Jesus do both of those come together. God loves to the uttermost in Jesus. How far is he willing to go in his love? All the way to the end, laying down his own life. How far was he willing to go in his judgment? All the way, not making an exception even when sin was laid on his own son.

Let me make one application before moving to our third point. If you have never accepted the judgment of God, don’t mistake God’s patience in the current age as a cancellation of judgment. The Bible teaches that God is withholding his judgment now in order to give space for people to come in faith to the only one able to rescue us out of that judgment. Remember though, delayed patience is not the same as cancelled judgment. Many go so far as to believe that God owes us this cancellation of judgment. Imagine that you begin receiving in the mail every day a \$100 bill from an anonymous source, and Saturday’s mail has two such bills. On the first day this happens, you are surprised and pleased. The same response comes throughout the first week. But in the second week, you start to expect to find it when you go out to the mailbox. Imagine this continues for 20 years. Now you are assuming it will come, and you have even incorporated these funds into your budget. Then after twenty years, it stops. You are angry now. Doesn’t this anonymous giver know

that you have bills to pay? How dare he leave you high and dry financially! Do you see what has happened? What at first was received as a gift came in time to be viewed as an obligation. The same thing happens with the withholding of God's judgment. He has been withholding this final judgment for quite some time now, and it is out of his kindness and patience that he does so. Receive it today like it's the first day in my analogy of the \$100 bills. God does not owe you such patience, but he gives it to give space for trusting Jesus. Trust him today.

III. Herem Warfare and Its Contemporary Application

To be an Israelite in the time of Moses and Joshua was to be a fighter. To be a Christian in our day is also to be a fighter. Let me mention just two battles we are called to fight. First, we fight the evil within us. We fight idolatry, beginning with the idolatry within our own hearts. The fight against idolatry is a theme appearing repeatedly in this chapter. Israel is warned not to embrace the gods of the land they are entering now. One place where that theme appears is in the section that seems to teach the health and wealth gospel. In verses 13-15 God does indeed promise to bless his people with wealth, viewed largely in terms of descendants, agricultural fruitfulness, and good health. He mentions these things because they were the promises of the gods of the land. Those living in these lands believed that the gods of the land had authority to grant health and wealth. God reminds his people that he is the giver of good gifts. As we fight the idolatry within, we need to remember that the true God is the one who supplies us with everything we need. He does so in his time and his way. And God says to us a form of what he says to his people in verse 17: **"If you say in your heart, 'This evil is greater than I. How can I defeat it?'"** God has a word for us. Don't be afraid of evil, but remember what the Lord did to his enemies in Egypt. Trust him today.

We no longer fight people, but we are called to fight for people. We fight to see them delivered from the judgment of God through Jesus. What does that fight look like? It includes prayer. Are there people for whom you are praying, asking God to open their hearts to Jesus? It also includes the selfless pursuit of people who are outside of Christ. It is often the case that people's hearts are too hard to hear of the good news of Jesus. But where words may fail, actions can speak as we show the love of Jesus through self-giving, sacrificial love for others. But words are also necessary in this fight for people. It includes getting some training in how to share the gospel with others. If you don't have ready at hand a 5-10 presentation of the gospel, let me encourage you to learn one.

CONCLUSION:

The judgment of God is real, and the love of God is real. Receive them both and rest in God's love through Jesus.