Preparing for War, Joshua Style



Hespeler, November 8, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Remembrance Sunday
Joshua 5:13-15, Psalm 78, Matthew 25:1-13, Matthew 26:51-52

When the army of Israel arrived in the area near the City of Jericho, Joshua gathered his troops and addressed them.

"I don't want any of you to forget that we are now in hostile territory," he declared. "This area around the great city of Jericho is nothing like we have ever had to deal with before. They have a standing army and defences the like of which we have not seen since Egypt, and none of you were there for that.

Rules of Engagement

"So, I want to remind you of the rules of engagement that we need to follow and follow to the letter while we are here.

"First of all, you need to assume that everyone you meet in this place is your foe. Unless they offer you proof or an oath that they are on our side, they are automatically our enemy.

"I cannot stress this enough. If you are not for us, then you are against us. There is no middle ground. If you are not enthusiastically and completely fighting for our goals, then we will do whatever we can to kill and dispossess you.

God Is on Our Side

"The second thing that I am going to tell you is that, even if we are surrounded by enemies, we have someone on our side that they do not. We have God on our side, and that is why we will never be defeated.

"The third thing that I am going to tell you is that we are here because God has given us this land. Every inch from Jericho to the great sea, from Dan to Beer Sheba is the land that God gave to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, our great ancestors. Today that inheritance is ours to claim and to own by right of conquest.

This Land is Ours

"Because this land is given to us, we can take it, we can divide it, and we can do with it whatever we wish. And if anyone happens to be living on the land or farming it, if anyone is claiming any ownership, then it is up to us to exterminate all such people and to expel them from the land.

"So," General Joshua concluded, "I want you to keep your eyes open. Challenge anyone you see. Ask if they are one of us or one of our adversaries. Let us keep our discipline high and set all of our sentries so that no enemy gets any advantage over us."

All or Nothing Thinking

That is surely how Joshua must have addressed his troops, right? We always make that kind of calculus in times of war, don't we?

As soon as any kind of conflict is initiated, human beings fall into that mode of thinking. There is no place for shades of gray. Everything has to be either white or black. Do you remember, for example, what George W. Bush declared in the aftermath of September 11? He put the whole world on notice. "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make," he said. "Either you are with us, or you are with the

terrorists."

It is the kind of rhetoric that makes perfect sense at such times. When Bush made that declaration, it was met with thunderous applause and a standing ovation. Certainly no one in his nation or many other nations said anything different.

Always More Complicated

But it is also the kind of statement that doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Yes, when conflicts arise, people have a tendency to choose sides, and we certainly hope they choose the right sides for the right reasons.

But motivations are not always so straightforward. Various parties may pledge their support, but they don't stop having their own goals and needs. They are not going to go all-in like those who are directly involved. And sometimes, if there is going to be any resolution to the conflict, you need somebody who can stand apart from taking one side or the other.

Brains in Conflict Mode

But when our brains are high on conflict, we easily forget that. It becomes all or nothing. And that mode of thinking has become so deeply embedded that we don't just act that way in times of war. We adopt this approach in any kind of conflict, even these days in a difference of opinion.

And so it is that in our politics, in the modern culture wars, even when it comes to medical matters, you increasingly hear people speaking in those terms: "You're either with us or you're against us." So, yes, I'm pretty sure Joshua would have spoken to the people using such rhetoric.

Of Course God Was on Their Side

I'm pretty sure that he also said the part about God being on their side. I mean, that is pretty much a given when you are talking about a Bible story where we have a God who has chosen the people of Israel and promised them a land.

But of course, we need to remember that this story was written in a time when most people (including the biblical writers) took it for granted that each nation had its own god. So they didn't necessarily see a problem with calling their god to fight on their side because they assumed that there was another different god fighting for their enemy. War was a contest of the gods in which humans only played a small part.

All Sides Claiming the Same God

But we have to look at that question of God being on our side in a different light today, don't we? We believe, and our enemies generally believe, that there only is one God. And so, we have a situation in which both sides claim that the same God is on their side.

You see it everywhere. Ukraine and Russia are both Orthodox Christian nations who are claiming that God is on their side. As Israel and Hamas or Lebanon face off, or as the United States faces off against Iran, you hear rhetoric on every side that the same God who is known through the Abrahamic traditions is "on our side."

And sure, the claim that God is on our side can stir hearts. It can help get people behind the war. The claim becomes a psychological weapon in our arsenal. But when every side is using that same weapon, it generally only makes it all the harder to find any resolution.

Land as Commodity

But yes, I am sure Joshua would have assured them that God was on their side. He also would have

reminded them of the promise of land, that this land was given to them and that, when this was all over, they could do with it whatever they wished. Land, in this mode of thinking, is a commodity. It is something that you can conquer and take and own.

And that is something that continues to drive conflict to this day. It has certainly driven much of what has happened in Gaza over the last three years, resulting in a massive scale of death and destruction. Every side in that conflict reminds us that it is all about who owns what pieces of land.

And let's not pretend that it doesn't drive conflict here in Canada either. It helped tip the scales in the recent upset election in British Columbia. The fear that recognizing legitimate Indigenous land claims might disrupt people's understanding of private property ownership absolutely drove people to the polls.

So, it is not at all that surprising that Joshua would have raised all of these issues with the people that he led at such a key moment. What is surprising is what happened to him shortly afterwards.

Joshua on Sentry

It was late, very late, and Joshua had sent his troops off to sleep in their own tents because he knew that they were exhausted and would need to be as well-rested as possible in the morning.

He knew what he had told them about being vigilant and keeping watch, and he had decided to be an example by personally taking this watch. What else was he supposed to do? He was wound up so tight that there was no way he would ever get to sleep anyways.

Joshua slowly walked the camp's outer perimeter. He had no lamp. There was no moon in the sky, only the stars burning bright. He found himself staring intently at every shape that emerged from the gloom.

Frightening Shapes

His heart jumped as he saw what he thought was a wild animal hunting in the night, but as he looked closer, he realized it was only an oddly shaped rock. And then he saw what looked like the shadow of a man creeping across the ground. He was about to cry out in alarm before he finally recognized it as a discarded bit of baggage.

After a while, he began to dismiss all the shapes that he saw as mere figments of his imagination. When he turned the corner and saw a tree, he actually laughed. It seemed to have almost exactly the shape of a man holding a sword. But his laughter turned to a stone-cold chill that flashed through his whole body as the sword moved and the man turned to look directly at him.

Who Goes There!

And I'd like to say that Joshua's voice didn't break and he didn't stammer as he called out what a good soldier is supposed to say in that situation. But it did. "Who… who goes there? Are you a friend or a foe? **Are you one of us or one of our adversaries?**"

And all of the expectations that we build around war and conflict were there in that question, weren't they? But with one word the stranger shattered all of them. That word was **"Neither."**

The Problem with "Us or Them"

We always want to turn the world into a question of us or them, all or nothing, my way or the highway. But that one word reminds us that the world rarely works that way. That black-and-white way of seeing things is a lie. If we impose such a stark choice on those we see as our friends and allies, or if we impose it on our perceived enemies and adversaries, we are not respecting them as whole persons or

complex nations.

So long as we hold onto that "us or them" worldview, conflict and war is inevitable. We need to understand that. Peace, compromise and true partnership will never break out so long as all we can see is black and white. Peace is always found in the shades of grey.

Commander of the LORD'S Army

The stranger didn't just give that one-word answer, though. What he actually said was, **"Neither, but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come."** So we are not just talking about "You're either with us or you're against us." We are suddenly shifting to the claim we make so easily that God is on our side.

Of all the people who have ever lived, you would think Joshua should be the one most able to make this claim. Here he is, called to lead the people on a campaign that Godself has ordained! Of course God is on his side, right? Right?

But God's messenger says, "Slow down there, big guy. What makes you think that God picks sides? God's army is neither on your side nor your enemy's!"

Failing to Understand God

And that says so much to our situation today, doesn't it? I don't care how righteous you think your cause is. I don't care what your personal belief and faith in God may be. When you jump to the conclusion that God is on your side, you are showing how little you understand God or how God operates.

When you say that, you are also using rhetoric that has been proven again and again throughout history to make conflict more brutal and less open to resolution. If anything, rather than claiming God is on our side, we should be seeking to make sure, in all humility, that we are on God's side.

Holy Ground

Joshua gains one more piece of wisdom from this strange visitor, and it has something to do with land. Far from affirming to Joshua that this land they are entering is to be theirs to exploit at will, what does the messenger say? **"Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy."**

The message could not be clearer. The land is not a commodity to be exploited and possessed. It is sacred. It is sacred because it belongs to God and not to us, so we need to be very aware of how we are using and abusing it.

The settlers in this place should have learned that lesson from the indigenous people who lived here before them, but we don't seem to be very good at learning such lessons.

A Troubling Book

The Book of Joshua is troubling in many ways. It tells the story of violent conquest and even includes incidents we would call genocidal today. We could have a whole discussion about those problems with the book, but that will have to wait for another time.

Today, let's just note that this is not the only message found within the book. Somehow this strange story made it in. And it made us in to pull us back from "it's us-or-them thinking." It is there to warn us not to go around claiming that God is on our side. It is also there to teach us new reverence for the land upon which we live.

If we could only live out those lessons, it seems to me that the world might become a much more peaceful place.