

## The Warrior God Joshua 5:13-6:27

A current article in a Christian woman's on-line journal is the latest in a long stream to protest the "Jesus is my boyfriend" theme: "Why Jesus Isn't Your Boyfriend: A Critique of Dating God." The author points to two problems with the theme: "Marriage to Jesus while waiting for a husband can often [a] trivialize our Savior in a way that makes him more like a sweet boyfriend who takes us out on dates, rather than the God-man who paid for our sin on the cross. [b] Jesus did not accomplish redemption to marry us individually. He died for the church corporate, of which we are apart."

True enough: Jesus is not *just* someone who loves us (especially not in a treacherous way), he also paid for our sin on the cross. But he is still more: he is a fierce warrior who – in the tradition of Old Testament YHWH – fights on behalf of his people. This week we reflect on God who fought for Israel, and Jesus who fights for the Church.

### Day 1: Exodus 14-15 God fights for Israel: first round

We come across the theme in Joshua 6, but that is not the first place it appears. In fact, Joshua 6 explicitly and intentionally recalls the exodus from Egypt. After the Passover, when the angel strikes dead the first-born of every family in Egypt, Pharaoh responds by expelling the Jews from Egypt (Exodus 12). But then, not wanting to lose the free labor of so many slaves, and he hunts them down in the wilderness to recapture them. Caught between the armies of Egypt to the back, and the Red Sea to the front, the people panic. But Moses exhorts them: "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today... The Lord will fight for you: you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:13-14). Famously, the Lord does as he promised: he parts the Red Sea for Israel to scramble through, then when the Egyptians follow in their chariots, the wheels fall off, so they turn to retreat: "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt" (Exodus 14:25).

Then Moses stretches out his hand, and the waters drown both soldier and horse: "The entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea – not one of them survived" (Exodus 14:28). So Israel sang in worship: "The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea... The Lord is a warrior ... Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea... Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:1,3,21). Today we worship God as the omnipotent Lord of heaven and earth, ruler of all armies and armaments, and protector of his people.

**Day 2: Joshua 5:13-15 God fights for Israel: the commander of the Lord's army**

As a whole, the book of Joshua intentionally and explicitly links its namesake with Moses. The only leader this generation has ever known – the man God used to free the nation from captivity in Egypt and deliver them through the Red Sea – is now dead. Anxiety forces the pressing question: What will become of the nation now as it faces new peril? God anoints Joshua as he had anointed Moses: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you” (Joshua 1:5); “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses” (Joshua 3:7); “That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they revered him all the days of his life, just as they had revered Moses” (Joshua 4:14).

The vision of a warrior angel links Joshua to Moses in three ways. For one, both have visions at a crucial time in their calling: Moses sees the bush that burns without burning up (Exodus 3:1-3); Joshua sees an angel attired in battle gear (Joshua 5:13-15). For another, just as God fought for Israel during Moses' time, so now during Joshua's time: Who is this angelic being attired for war? The commander of the army of the Lord. For the third, Joshua asks, “What message does my superior officer have for his subordinate?” The commander of the Lord's army replied, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy’” (Joshua 5:15). This response is not entirely substantial or illuminating, but it corresponds precisely to Moses' earlier vision of the burning bush, when God commanded him, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

God leads his people through specially called leaders: Moses and Joshua so far; and eventually another, a new and greater Moses, who goes by the Greek version of the Hebrew name ‘Joshua’: Jesus (Matt 17:3-4; John 1:17; 6:32-33). We worship him for delivering his people in ways far more dramatic than the rescue from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, or the defeat of Jericho. He is not some feminized boyfriend, he is a powerful soldier.

**Day 3: Joshua 6:1-27 God fights for Israel: second round**

Another of the continuities between Moses and Joshua comes in the parallel between the defeat of the Egyptian army and the defeat of the army of Jericho. The crossing of the Red Sea occurred just after the celebration of the first Passover, during the succeeding seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Exodus 12). Now, a generation later, after another Passover feast, Israel spends the next week – the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread – marching around the city of Jericho. As the feast period comes to its culmination, the city falls not by anything the Israelites do, but by the hand of God. “‘See,’ God says as he lays out instructions at the beginning, ‘I have delivered Jericho into your

hands, along with its king and its fighting men” (Joshua 6:2). Then, on the seventh day, Joshua calls his warriors into battle, “Shout! For the Lord has given you the city!” (Joshua 6:16).

Israel does not win this battle, any more than it triumphed over Egypt at the Red Sea. God is a warrior, and he wins the battle single-handedly, on behalf of his people.

#### **Day 4: Colossians 2:13-15 Jesus fights for his church: first round**

Ever since the Reformation, the Protestant tradition has emphasized Jesus’ death for sinners and in their place, for the forgiveness of sin. That is truly one reason why he died, and one purpose that he accomplished in dying. But this is not a comprehensive explanation for why Jesus died, or what a full account of what he accomplished by his death.

The substitutionary death of Christ is a great comfort to those plagued by a sense of their own sinfulness. But, while this is a common focus in modern Western culture, this is not the highest spiritual priority in many parts of the world. Fear of demons is often a more pressing predicament. Paul combines both themes in his letter to the church in Colossae: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins... Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:13,15).

The picture here comes from first-century military culture: when a general achieved a notable victory, the Roman Senate could invite him to lead a triumphal procession into Rome, with his army leading P.O.W.s into the city for execution, to the praises of the masses along the parade route. Jesus is that conquering general, Paul says, and he drags the demons along in his triumphal process. Jesus’ mechanism for conquering the demons is especially striking: not by brute force, but by the cross. By his atoning death for our sins, he canceled the executioner’s decree against us.

#### **Day 5: Ephesians 1:18-23 Jesus fights for his church: second round**

Jesus conquered Satan on the cross; he conquered Satan again by rising from the cross, and ascending into heaven. The Christians in Ephesus – even more so than in neighboring Colossae – fears demonic spirits. In response, Paul explains the significance of resurrection and ascension, referencing the mighty power of God “which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-22). “Rule and

authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given”: all of these expressions refer to demons. In his ascension, Jesus claimed his rightful seat of power and authority above all others, including demons.

But this is not just a statement about Christ. That power that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him over all spirits and demons works for us and on our behalf (1:19). We need not fear demons. The exalted Christ protects us from their machinations.

### **Day 6: Revelation 19:11-21 Jesus fights for his church: third round**

The apostle John picks up the theme of Jesus as warrior to address another scenario: his audience was not so much afraid of supernatural demons, but of human predators. The pressure is on them to offer veneration to a statue of the Roman emperor. At one level, this is merely a statement of political loyalty, a pledge not to rebel. For Christians, though, this looks too much like worship, and so they refuse. Roman officials take that refusal as political insurrection, and so put them in prison and subject them to torture. These believers have no power to defend themselves.

Nonetheless, they are not defenseless, for Jesus will fight for them. Not immediately, perhaps. More will go to prison. Some will die. But eventually, Jesus will intervene. He comes leading an army, riding on a white stallion, his very words powerful enough to strike down his foes. Worldwide forces gather armies to war against him, but he readily defeats them, and calls the vultures to feed on their dead bodies. The image is violent and graphic.

With these words, John – and Jesus – offers hope to the suffering Church of his day, and of ours. At times of persecution, many fall away, and the entire Church in a particular region may be in danger of dying off. But behind the scenes, the Bible tells us, Jesus is engaged in battle on behalf of his people. Eventually that battle breaks into the open, and he slays all who oppose him, and rescues his beleaguered people.

So Jesus’ role as warrior ensures that no one, not even a supernatural malevolence, can destroy his people. He freed us from captivity to Satan by dying on the cross, removing the sentence of judgment which gave the devil claim on us. He defeated Satan a second time, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, where he sits enthroned over all powers. He will defeat Satan a third time, at the final battle of Good versus Evil. So we have no need to fear: either that our sin will condemn us, or that demons can oppress us, or that persecution may destroy us. Jesus fights on our behalf; no enemy can stand against his might.