

Introduction

In his second letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul said something profound. He told them we—Christians—are “the aroma of Christ”. He means when others “smell” us, they smell Christ. Then he adds a surprising clarification.

Text ² Cor 2:15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. ~~Who is sufficient for these things?~~
2 Corinthians 2:15–16

Notice it is the same scent. It is interpreted by some as the stench of death but to those who are in Christ it is the sweet fragrance of life. Again, the scent doesn’t change from one to the other. We see a similar thing when we come to the book of Judges. To some, the language of the Ancient Near East concerning warfare is ugly and nasty. To others, to those who recognize what is actually being said, it is the offer of hope and the promise of salvation. Consider, for example, what atheist Richard Dawkins had to say about this Ancient Near Eastern rhetoric in his book “The God Delusion”.

Quote The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.
Richard Dawkins, “The God Delusion”

May aim this morning is to show you the hope and the promise that is found in a book such as Judges, even with all the apparent killing and the ugliness of warfare and rebellion and disobedience. My aim is to show you the real meaning of Ancient Near Eastern warfare rhetoric and the hope of the gospel found in it. Even more, may aim this morning is to exalt the Lord Jesus, whose mercy and grace and salvation is on display, even in a text like ours.

We begin our new series in the books of Judges and Ruth. We’re including Ruth because the events in the short book take place during the time of the judges, and are part of the good news that the book of Judges holds for us even today. We begin our series in Judges as one is wont to do: by starting elsewhere. We’re in Deuteronomy 7.

Text Deut 7:1 When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, ² and when

the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. ³ You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. ⁵ But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

Deuteronomy 7:1–5

The Conquest

One of the most difficult criticisms of Christianity is leveled against all the killing in Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan. Richard Dawkins and many others point to the description of the fighting in the land of Canaan as proof of the evil they claim the Bible endorses. They cite verses such as this one from Joshua 6:

Text Josh 6:21 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.
Joshua 6:21

The problem Richard Dawkins has is actually the same problem you and I have, at least when it comes to interpreting Ancient Near Eastern literature: we're twenty-first century people. We read things from our perspective. We understand things from our perspective. We often fail to recognize that saying what the Bible says is not always meaning what the Bible means. For example, how many days was Jesus buried in his tomb? Jesus himself said in Matthew 12, just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale "three days and three nights", "so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth". Scripture also says he rose from the dead "on the third day"—before the third night.

How can he be buried until the third day and for a full three days and three nights? Saying what Scripture says is not always meaning what Scripture means. The expression "three days and three nights" was an idiomatic way to say all or *part of* three days. We, being modern Americans, want this to mean three 24-hour periods, but that is not what the expression ever meant. It is even more difficult when we read that "both men and women, young and old" were put to "the edge of the sword". *Did the Israelites kill babies?*

The answer is actually in our text in Deuteronomy 7, so let's take a closer look at it. God gives instructions to the people of Israel through Moses for when they enter the land of Canaan. When this was written they were still in the wilderness, though the time for their entrance into the land was drawing near. God tells them of the time when *he* will take them into the land and when *he* will clear away many nations before them. God is the one giving them the land. God is the one giving them the victory. Before everything else, taking the land is something God does. It is his world. He created it. It belongs to him. He can do with his land as he sees fit and he sees fit to give it to the people of Israel.

He specifically mentions seven nations, and says they are “more numerous and mightier” than Israel. Israel cannot simply take them all on in battle and hope to win. God, however, can. Notice what he says in verse 2. When the Lord gives them over to Israel, that is, when Israel defeats them in battle, “then you must devote them to complete destruction”. This is the Hebrew word *herem*. Israel must *herem* them. They must devote them “to complete destruction”. That sounds an awful lot like literally putting them to the edge of the sword, man and woman, young and old, doesn’t it? It does because we are not Ancient Near Eastern people. Again, let’s see carefully what the text says.

First, God will lead them into the land. Second, God will “give them over to” Israel. Third, Israel will defeat them in any armed resistance. Then! *Then* they are to be *herem*. “Devotion to destruction”—*herem*—happens *after* the battle!

In the Ancient Near East several languages and cultural groups had the concept of *herem*. It was used of things devoted to a god or to gods. What this really meant was it was no longer available to a mere human to use. If an ox were devoted to a god through sacrifice, a human could not eat that ox. That would violate the very idea of *herem*. Any thing could be *herem*, but so could a person. For a person to be *herem* meant that person was not “available” to another. You couldn’t touch the person or engage in business with the person, etc. The person was off limits on account of being *herem*—banned, devoted to destruction. *This does not mean the person died!*

Again, what does the text say? God will lead them into the land and will give over the people to them and Israel will defeat any armed resistance, and then Israel will *herem* them—devote them to destruction. Verse 2 continues by instructing Israel that when the people are *herem*, or devoted to destruction, Israel must not make a covenant with them. With what? Their dead bodies? They must show no mercy to them. To what? Their dead bodies? They must not intermarry with them. With what? *Their dead bodies?*

Clearly Moses understands the people who are *herem*—devoted to destruction—will still be very much alive after being banned from “use”. Devotion to destruction does not mean genocide, or the command preventing them from marrying the people would be utterly ridiculous. That would be like a parent telling a child to clean her plate by eating every last bite, but then to make sure she put her leftovers in the fridge. *What leftovers?* The only way that can make sense is if “every last bite” means something like “until you’re full”.

In verse 4 God explains the reason the people of the land are to be *herem*: if they are not *herem* they would entice Israel away from the Lord God and they would begin worshiping and serving the gods of the seven nations. This would anger the Lord and Israel would cease to be a people! This is what it means to be *herem*!

The Africa Bible Commentary explains this very succinctly:

Quote Once the enemy had, with God’s aid, been defeated, they were to be utterly destroyed (7:2–3). The word translated *destroy them* literally means to set something apart for God.

Luciano C. Chianeque and Samuel Ngewa, Africa Bible Commentary

Israel could not make use of something set apart for God. It is devoted to God and God can do whatever he wants with it, but that thing or that person was no longer available to ordinary humans. To devote the people to destruction is explained in verse 5.

Text

Deut 7:5 But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

Deuteronomy 7:5

Israel could not make use of the altars and the pillars and the Asherah poles and the carved images. These were off-limits to Israel. Because the land belonged to God, Israel was to remove these idolatrous things from the land. After the Canaanites were defeated—not slaughtered!—their religious furniture was to be removed from the land, lest the Israelites be tempted by them. Another Old Testament scholar put it this way:

Quote

In summary, when the Israelites conquered their new land, they were to destroy the old inhabitants, refusing to enter into any kind of treaty with them, either political or marital. Any kind of treaty would be a compromise and would lead to disaster; therefore the Israelites were to destroy systematically the religious “furniture” of their enemies, indicating thereby their complete lack of recognition for the gods of their enemies.

Peter C. Craigie, NICOT Deuteronomy

Notice what “destroy” means here: not entering into any kind of covenantal arrangement with them! You can’t enter into a political treaty with dead people. You can’t marry dead people. You can, however, bow before their idols along with them. It is this that *herem* was meant to deal with.

Identity

What we see is the idea of *herem*, that is, completely devoting something to “destruction”, is primarily about avoiding idolatry. In Joshua 6 when the people were marching around Jericho, they were told this:

Text

Josh 6:18 But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it. ¹⁹ But all silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.

Joshua 6:18–19

Here we see silver and gold and bronze and iron are *herem*—devoted to destruction. This means removed from common or ordinary use. Individual Israelites could not make use of any of these things. The spoils of war—in this case, precious metals—were devoted to *the Lord*. They were *holy*, or set apart solely for the Lord. This was true of the people as well. They were to be set apart for the Lord to deal with as he saw fit. Israel was not to marry them or engage in commerce with them or anything of the sort, lest they be tempted to worship their gods.

This is one of those texts that make people scratch their heads for numerous reasons. Notice Israel was forbidden from marrying any of these foreigners. Their sons and daughters

were not to be married off to Canaanite sons and daughters. Our tendency is to want to read this so rigidly and so literally that we lose the real meaning altogether and we begin to think the real issue really was *interracial marriage*. It was not! Let me show you what I mean.

Text Num 12:1 Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.
Numbers 12:1

Moses, the *lawgiver*, the very one who wrote the words “You shall not intermarry with them”, married a Cushite woman. Cush was the ancient name of Ethiopia. Moses was a light-brown Semitic man who married a black-skinned African woman. Aaron was his brother. Aaron had a son named Eleazar.

Text Ex 6:25 Eleazar, Aaron’s son, took as his wife one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. ~~These are the heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites by their clans.~~
Exodus 6:25

We don’t know who Putiel is but we know Eleazar, being a light-brown Semitic man, married one of his daughters and they named their son “Phinehas” which means “black”. Why would a man with light-brown skin marry a woman and name their son “Black”? Putiel was almost certainly Nubian. Phinehas had, apparently, the skin tone of his mama!

Right before Israel conquered the fortress of Jericho, a Canaanite woman named Rahab helped hide the spies from Israel. She was spared, which means she—hear this—Rahab was *not herem*.

During the time of wandering in the wilderness when the tabernacle was being built, each tribal head—twelve men—brought their tribe’s offering to Moses. They would give their offerings over twelve days in order of rank. Judah, being the largest tribe, went first.

Text Num 7:12 He who offered his offering the first day was Nahshon the son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah.
Numbers 7:12

In the wilderness, Nahshon was the most prominent tribal chief in all Israel, as evidenced by him giving his tribe’s offering first. He had a son named Salmon. Being the son of Israel’s greatest tribal chief made Salmon the most eligible bachelor in all Israel. To marry him would be an incredible honor, for he would take his father’s place as tribal chief over the greatest tribe in all Israel. Salmon is mentioned in another Israelite’s genealogy.

Text Mt 1:4 ...and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse,
Matthew 1:4–5

Notice the name Ruth! Who was Ruth?

Text Ruth 4:10 ~~Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.~~

It is clear that when Moses tells the Israelites they must not intermarry with non-Israelites, he does not mean inter-racial marriage is off limits. He means *inter-faith* marriage is off limits. He himself was in an inter-racial marriage!

This is another example of how saying what the Bible says is not always meaning what the Bible means. I could point to Caleb, the spy from the tribe of Judah, who was himself a Canaanite but who worshiped the God of Israel and was therefore incorporated into the people of God. I could point to many other examples throughout Israel's history—until the exile. During the exile they lost their understanding of Moses' words and began to despise the nations around them.

Beginning with the exodus from Egypt, when Exodus 12:38 tells us a “mixed multitude” left Egypt with them and joined them as God's people, foreigners who would worship the God of Israel were always welcome to join the people of God. Old Testament scholar John Walton writes,

Quote Because Rahab abandons her Canaanite identity and becomes an Israelite, the identity she represented is gone, and therefore to *herem* her personally would serve no purpose.

...

Rahab is not an exception to the *herem*; she is the embodiment of it.

John Walton, “The Lost World of the Canaanite Conquest”, p. 213

Herem was never about destroying a people, but about destroying idolatry. It was about welcoming all who would worship the God of Israel. It was about insisting on worshiping the one true God and rejecting the idolatry of the world. It was about calling all nations to worship the one true God and receive him and his salvation. *This is good news!*

Quote Being of non-Israelite origin is not a disqualification for membership of the [Israelite] community in any period. The question is, what God do you serve? The reason for not marrying a Canaanite is that this will turn you away from following YHWH and lead to your serving other deities. A Canaanite who has made a commitment to YHWH is a different matter.

John Goldingay

Smarty Word *Herem* means those who trust in the one true God and follow him are welcomed to participate in his kingdom as a full-fledged member. It is an invitation to destroy one's idols and join God's people in worshiping the one true God. Rahab proves this.

Idols Are Insatiable

What is actually *herem*, or what is actually destroyed in the conquest is the people's false identity. Whether it is worshiping literal idols such as the Asherah poles Israel was commanded to chop down or the carved images they were commanded to burn with fire, or it is

some other form of idol, the identity given by that idol is false. God calls us all to declare those idols *herem*—to remove them from our lives and to never again bow down to them.

We often see the idol of material security. People pursue money and wealth as their primary goal in life, thinking that financial security gives them meaning and value. This is an idol. It's a false god that can never give what it promises.

Others make personal appearance or athleticism an idol. What matters is what others think of them. If they're beautiful or fit or otherwise attractive, then the world makes sense. Then all is well. They will pursue this with all of their energy and if they feel unattractive their world begins to fall apart. This is a false god that can never give what it promises.

For some it's physical health. For others it's material possessions. If they can get the things they want out of life, whether a car or a boat or a house or the right clothes or jewelry or a fat 401(k), then the world is right.

None of these things is bad. There is nothing wrong with a woman—or a man—desiring to be attractive. There is nothing wrong with good health or having an emergency fund. These are good and even wise things. In his typical fashion, the late Tim Keller put it this way:

Quote

It [idolatry] means turning a good thing into an ultimate thing.
Tim Keller

When you take something that is of finite worth—it has *value*, but it's of limited value—whether your health, another person, possessions, wealth, whatever, and you make it the most important thing in your life, you have created for yourself an idol. Only God is of infinite worth and so only God is worthy of your worship. Only God is worthy of your primary allegiance. Only God is worthy of your complete and total devotion. Giving ultimate meaning and value to anything or *anyone* other than God is idolatry.

We can do this with ministry. When we see gifted and capable ministry leaders, whether lead elders in Christ's church or leaders of non-profits, make ministry "success" their ultimate aim, there is nothing they won't do to satisfy that idol's demands. They will lie and cheat and steal because "success"—however it is measured—becomes the real goal. The idol of "success" is all that matters, and idols have an insatiable appetite for more.

An idol is finite, limited. This is why an idol always demands more of you. If money is the idol, you will never have enough money so you will deceive in order to get more. If pleasure is your idol you will not be happy with the parameters God places around sex so you will pursue it outside of marriage—or *selfishly* inside of marriage. You will never have enough sex. If ministry success is your idol you will never have enough converts, or serve enough clients, or get enough members. You will do and say anything to fill the seats. If popularity is your idol you will never have a large enough following. You will never get enough "Likes", and so your idol leaves you empty and miserable.

When you serve an idol you will always have to prove yourself. You will always have to show the idol how pretty you are or how capable you are or how valuable you are or how funny you are or how rich you are. You will never have enough because the idol itself is limited. *The idol* needs more from you.

God, however, is infinite. This means God does not *need* anything from you or from me. God is not dependent on J-T to grow this church and to change his people. God is not

dependent on your financial gifts or your spiritual gifts. God does not need your physical appearance or your skill and talents. God is perfectly content within himself and needs nothing outside himself.

When you make for yourself an idol you are seeking your identity in that thing. That thing or that person becomes your identity. It is what gives you meaning and purpose. You strive to become what that thing demands from you. You find yourself constantly having to prove your identity, prove that you're smart enough or attractive enough or talented enough or whatever it is. You have to prove to your idol—and to yourself—that you matter, that you have real value. Church, you don't have to prove anything to God.

What Israel needed to understand as they were getting ready to enter the land God promised them is they were the very people of God. What gave them meaning and purpose and value is God was their God and he rescued them. Therefore they should find their identity in being his people. Because he is infinite, his identity will overflow in them, filling them with joy and meaning and purpose. They would find real, lasting satisfaction in this: the God who made the heavens and the earth called them his children. Look at what God says to them immediately after instructing them to not bow down to the idols of the people of the land but to declare all idolatry *herem*:

Text Deut 7:6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.
Deuteronomy 7:6

God tells them to destroy the idolatry of the land for this reason: you are a people holy to the Lord. God has chosen them out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people. Do you see the identity he grants them? They, and they alone are the people of God. Anyone who would join them in faith was free to do so and they, too, would become the people of God, just like Moses' wife, just like Eleazar's wife, just like Rahab, just like Caleb, just like the mixed multitude.

Notice God calls them "his treasured possession". This is the Hebrew word *segullah*. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek in the third century before Christ, the translators used the Greek word *περιούσιος*. This means they are his people and are extremely important to him—not because of what they offer him, but because of what he offers *them*. Value is not derived from within his people; value is granted them, and God is satisfied with what he himself gives. Later in the Bible we encounter this word again.

Text Tit 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,
12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.
Titus 2:11–14

Do you see the call to devote our idols to destruction? Do you see the call for *herem*? We must renounce ungodliness and worldly passions. We must lay down our idols at the feet of

the Lord Jesus, for these things are not available to us to bow down to. Instead, we look to Jesus who purifies for himself *a people for his own possession*—his *περιούσιος*. His *segullah*.

Image I shared this Jackson Pollock painting with you before. This painting sold for \$140,000,000. It is paint drizzled on a canvas. Surely it's drizzled in a manner that neither you nor I could drizzle, by why should such a painting be worth so much money? The painting is worth \$140,000,000 because *someone was willing to pay \$140,000,000 for it*.

Text Tit 2:14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.
Titus 2:14

Notice the value God places on those who are in Christ. Notice the new identity he gives them. This value, this identity is not rooted in who *they* are, or in what *they* have done. Instead, this value is rooted entirely in who *he* is and what *he* has done.

Application

It is because of this identity that God grants to his people, an identity that continues to give and overflow, that both Israel and now the church must live as transformed people. The Lord claimed Israel at Mount Sinai and told them if they would be careful to obey him and keep his covenant, they would be his treasured possession—his *segullah*. They could not. That covenant, while gracious, could not make them holy. In time God promised a new covenant that would, in fact, make his people holy.

A significant difference with this new covenant is it would not be based on the obedience of his people. Instead, it would be rooted entirely in who God is and what he has done. This is why he became one of us and lived the life we were supposed to live and died the death we were supposed to die. If the new covenant were dependent on us, we'd all be lost. God knew this and God wanted to save, so he made a covenant that depended entirely on the obedience and faithfulness of the Lord Jesus.

We tend to think of ourselves as the hero in our stories but the truth is we were all, by nature, born *herem*. We were, each one of us, Rahab by birth and by choice. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians we were dead in our trespasses and sins and were by nature children of wrath *like the rest of mankind*. We were devoted to destruction, cut off from God and separated from him. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made himself *herem*, that we might be saved through faith.

God paid a very high price to make us his people. It is because of who he is and what he has done that we live transformed lives. Let us all cast down our idols and bow before the only one worthy of our worship and our devotion.