



Christian Today Digest

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Christian Today Website Articles

Sometimes Christian Today also includes an article of interest, which is not necessarily a good-news item but rather one that has been included for readers to pray about.

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

Judging Jericho: What should Christians do with the Bible's God-ordained violence?

By Joseph Hartropp

Leading on a Christian youth summer camp this year, I was a little thrown when I heard the Bible text we'd be exploring for the week: the Old Testament book of Joshua.

'Ah', I thought, 'Joshua: the one with the God-ordained genocide! Perfect for the kids.'

I confess I was relieved not to be preaching that week. But that's odd isn't it? Even having studied theology, there's parts of Scripture that I try and keep my distance from. I rather enjoyed the Veggie Tales depiction of Joshua's destruction of the Canaanite city of

Jericho, featuring an animated army of singing French peas felled by the faith of a trumpeting cucumber. It was formational!

But now a little older and more aware of how a theologically-charged obsession with race and territory can be a source of tragic destruction across the world, I'm not so comfortable.

Let's be clear, this isn't the case for taking scissors to Scripture and cutting out the bits we don't like – nor am I suggesting that there's a villainous 'Old Testament God' who delights in genocide but thankfully gets replaced by the meek and mild Jesus of the New Testament.

However, stories like Joshua are an inescapably difficult read: utter destruction, a command to kill and plunder from a foreign nation, and the troubling idea that racist violence is

okay if ‘God is on your side’. At least, it can feel like that’s what is going on. Can the stories be explained? It’s a complex problem not simply solved, but there are good ways and bad ways of reading these stories. If we can discern them, they may help us solve the puzzle of Old Testament violence, and the real question we’re probably asking: ‘what is God like – is he good?’

So, to focus it: why did God have to destroy Jericho? A recent book offers fresh insight on the question: Joshua Ryan Butler’s *The Skeletons in God’s Closet* is an important work that I’ve praised before as a highly accessible and thoughtful take on questions many might rather avoid, which makes the radical case for the ‘hope of holy war’.

Butler, drawing on scholarship, makes helpful points particularly surrounding the language that’s used in Joshua. Firstly, he says, we should imagine in

Jericho not a ‘civilian population centre’ but a ‘military stronghold’. That’s what the Hebrew word for ‘city’ (‘ir) would have meant to readers – a first line of defence that protected the civilians who were further beyond, not their actual home. Archaeology – and some complications in translating numbers – suggest Jericho itself was probably just a garrison for no more than 150 soldiers. As Butler puts it, this is the demise of a fort, not a ‘civilian massacre: God is pulling down the Great Wall of China, not demolishing Beijing’.

Then again, don’t some of God’s commands imply indiscriminate mass-slaughter? After all Moses and Joshua were given the grim commission to ‘utterly destroy them’ and ‘show no mercy’. But, Butler posits, Military ‘trash talk’ was popular in ancient Middle Eastern society and literature: energetic hyperbole used to emphasise

devastating military prowess, but not necessarily detail specific casualties.

It's not unlike the rhetoric used in popular sport: Manchester United weren't actually 'annihilated', they just lost 3–1. It was bad, but they will be back next week. Studies show it was true in ancient military accounts – when a mighty reputation was key for tribal survival. Scripture itself talks about Canaanites being totally wiped out, before they inevitably reappear in the chapters and books that follow. To admit this style is simply to accept that Bible-writers used the literary conventions of their day, and means the conquests of Joshua may not be on the scale we've imagined.

A third point is a more theological and narrational one: when it comes to divinely-mandated military conquest in the Old Testament, the focus is almost always not on military expertise, but

how God fights and wins the battle, defending the underdog of Israel against the odds. It's for this reason that Israel is continually commanded not to have a private army nor invest in military might. God wanted to cultivate faith, not a culture of war. This means the focus is not on merely violent, aggressive nationalism, but a personal, merciful creator God who can't be controlled – but can be trusted to be just.

It doesn't mean there's no blood or troubling questions, but it changes the perspective. If it's specifically God who wins the battle, then the tales of Joshua can't be simply used to justify contemporary nations who reckon God is 'on their side'. It might help us wrestle with the ethics of conquest, if we can trust that God is not a violent maniac but only ever does what is right.

Some may still recoil at these ‘mitigations’ – it’s worth noting that this brief summary can’t do them full justice – but these questions are at the very least worth engaging. It might be tempting to completely reject the stories we find tough in Scripture, but if I’m honest if I took that approach to the Bible, there wouldn’t be a lot of it left. A story made purely in our own image – what we’d like to see – may be momentarily pleasing but is ultimately shallow and all too familiar. The story we didn’t write offers more honesty, more challenge, more to see that we don’t yet understand.

Our world is one still constantly at war, and I’m glad that Scripture witnesses to the painful reality of conflict. We see that God has a part in it, but that ultimately his vision is not war but peace: in Christ we meet God’s son and Messiah who shows the way not of the

warmonger but of the self-giving lamb. He doesn't come to erase the stories of old, though perhaps he does come to redeem them, to show that violence is not ultimately 'good' (though at times it might be needed), nor the last word for the world. New Testament scholar Preston Sprinkle's book *Fight* offers an engaging survey of Scripture that makes a case for Christian non-violence today, with the Prince of Peace at its heart.

These ancient tales can trouble because they make us wonder what God is like – a crucial question indeed. We're also conscious of our own bloody context – when we look to God we want not more of the same but a way out from war. There are good scholarly arguments that help us see beyond popular caricatures and listen to the actual story, one that's more subtle and complex than we might think.

For example the book of Joshua presents one graphic tale of the King of Ai (Joshua 8:1–29), the leader of the city Israel fell after taking Jericho. When defeated, the King of this city is impaled and hung up on a pole outside Ai, a representative of its decline.

Christians worship a King who was also hung up outside a city in what his enemies saw as a public symbol of his (and his nation's) utter defeat. But there was more going on than they could see. In this dead King lay a powerful paradox: a hope that embraced life's violence but wasn't resigned to it, and would ultimately redeem it.

J John: Three gifts you can give homeless people this Christmas

By J John

Homeless people seem to be an increasingly common feature of our urban landscapes, sitting on the streets with their sleeping bags and blankets. We may be aware, too, that such people represent the visible tip of an iceberg: there are the ‘hidden homeless’ camped out on the floors of friends but who have nowhere to call their own.

Attitudes to the homeless vary. Some people dismiss ‘the homeless’ with no sympathy: ‘it’s their own fault’, ‘they should get a job’. Others throw them coins and move on swiftly. But others find themselves troubled and ask why doesn’t the government do something about them? The reality, I suspect, is

that most of us don't bother ourselves too much with the plight of those who are homeless. After all, we like to live in tidy worlds of warmth and cleanliness, and these untidy, bedraggled and troubling people just don't fit in.

The Bible in Lamentations 3:19–21 echoes the discomfort of the homeless: 'The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this.'

I think we need to consider the plight of those who are homeless and let me suggest we offer them three gifts.

First the gift of significance. There are many unfortunate aspects of being homeless but one of the worst is the way that you become insignificant; you become, in effect, invisible. People may step around you as if you were some

sort of hazard but deep down, where it really counts, they do not see you. You can also be dehumanised by simply being reduced to ‘an issue’ and referred to as ‘the homeless’ as if you were some urban nuisance like waste disposal.

Yet homelessness is about people. Every homeless person is an individual with a history of hopes that failed, dreams that became nightmares, and promises that were not delivered. They are like us except for this one thing: with them life went wrong. Every single person on the pavement has a sad and complex story, and those complexities are another reason why we need to avoid carelessly lumping them all together under the cold label ‘the issue of the homeless’. They are people and one size does not fit all.

Actually, if we are Christians we have even stronger reasons for treating such people as being significant. For a start,

we should remind ourselves that a homeless person is someone made in the image of God. Indeed we should go further, remembering that we serve Jesus who was born into homelessness, who said of himself that he had ‘no place even to lay his head’ (Matthew 8:20) and who, for our sake, was reduced to public humiliation.

Let me suggest one way of giving a homeless person significance: if you regularly pass the same individual, try to get his or her name and, from then on, greet them with it. It’s a reminder to them, and to you, that they are human and not a statistic.

Second, we need to give homeless people the gift of sympathy. True sympathy is something more than making homeless people into an issue with which to score political points. No, I mean genuine deep concern. After all, no one makes homelessness their career

choice. These are people for whom something went so badly wrong that they started down the slippery slope that leads to life on the pavement.

Of course in today's merciless world, mistakes go unforgiven and any slippery slope is well lubricated: landlords evict, banks foreclose, bailiffs arrive and doors are closed. And once you are down you tend to stay down. It's not easy applying for a job when your address is 'no fixed abode', or looking for jobs from a park bench, or remaining employed when you can't wash regularly. In every statistic the odds are stacked against homeless people: they are more frequently abused, have worse health and have appallingly low life expectancies. If you still struggle to find any sympathy for them, take a moment and replay your own life. It's not hard to find a point where, had events been only slightly different, it

could be you there shivering as you hold out your Styrofoam cup. Indeed, we should all reverently say, ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’

Finally, we should offer the gift of support. We may want to give money but a thoughtful and strategic approach to giving support is better than the impulsive, irregular gift. Precisely because of the complexities involved, getting people out of homelessness is hard. It takes time, money and sustained effort. One of the problems with the official efforts to deal with homelessness is that their solutions tend to focus on dealing with the symptoms not the cause.

It is encouraging that many of the initiatives with homeless people have come out of Christianity: the Salvation Army, for a start, and Shelter, one of the leading charities in this area, was founded by the Reverend Bruce Kenrick

in 1966. Let us support the Salvation Army and Shelter and maybe some of us need to support by pioneering some new initiatives and projects.

One of the most intriguing sayings of Jesus is: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35). To offer those who are homeless significance, sympathy and support isn't easy but here, from the most reliable authority, we have the promise that if we do so we will be blessed.

Two years after his wife was murdered, Indianapolis pastor Davey Blackburn announces engagement

By JB Cachila

Two years after his wife was murdered, Indianapolis pastor Davey Blackburn has announced that he is now engaged and set to marry this year.

In a blog entry titled “I just popped the question . . . & she said yes!” Blackburn narrated his story of how God healed his heart and brought him to this moment where he is now engaged to Kristi Monroy.

“So friends,” he wrote, “let me introduce you to the beautiful Kristi

Monroy and her adorable daughter Natalia,”

“Kristi has quickly become like a mother to Weston and Natalia an older sister,” he added, “And I have quickly fallen in love with both of them.”

Blackburn lost his wife Amanda after she was mortally wounded in a home invasion on November 10, 2015. Amanda was pregnant with their second child at the time, which meant Davey lost both his wife and their unborn child.

Hurt and still healing, Davey decided not to pursue any relationship with another woman, until after the first year anniversary of his wife’s death. In fact, he said, he kept their wedding ring until November 11, 2016, exactly a year after her death.

Davey said that for most of 2016, was careful around other single women because he was quite vulnerable at the

time. With Kristi, however, it was a different thing.

But he also admits in his post that he worried that he might have too much “baggage” for another woman to take on and that at one point, he even felt hopeless he would ever re-marry.

‘I was bringing quite a bit of [baggage]’ into any relationship myself—recovering from losing a wife to murder, a two-year old son, an internationally known story, and the inevitable reality that whoever stepped into a relationship with me wouldn’t be able to help feeling like they were living in Amanda’s shadow and under the scrutiny of everyone who was following the story,’ he said.

‘In fact, when I gave it any considerable thought, it seemed an almost impossible hurdle to overcome. For that

reason, I would occasionally feel pretty hopeless about finding true love again.'

A new chapter

Davey saw Kristi in September of 2016 at a Crossfit gym where he works out and recognized her as someone who had first started attending his church a few months before. But he wasn't ready to initiate anything yet.

Over time, he discovered Kristi's love for Jesus, her heart for service, and the connections that she had with his personal story – that her father was a chaplain at the prison where Amanda's killers are serving out their sentence and has regular conversations with them. Soon, with guidance and help from trusted friends and family, including Amanda's, they grew more aware of what God wanted for them.

“The connection I felt with this girl,” Blackburn said, “seemed to outweigh the sadness I felt with the absence of Amanda.”

With a blessing from their families and Amanda’s family, and with support from the church, they are now planning their wedding.

So in December of this year Kristi will be my wife!” Davey shared happily. “And we will be a family!”

“We can’t wait to celebrate God’s redemption in our story!” he added.

Oswald Chambers: The most famous Christian writer who never wrote a book

By Nicholas Gray

A hundred years ago this year, one of the UK's best-loved Christian writers and communicators died in an Egyptian army camp during the Great War.

Oswald Chambers is known to millions of readers around the world, especially in North America. Sadly, in his own country, he is hardly a household name, as he should be.

Only 43 when he died, Chambers left a young widow and a small daughter to carry on his literary work. Significantly, he is better known now than ever he was in his lifetime.

Rev Oswald Chambers was born in Aberdeen in 1874, the son of a Baptist minister and one of eight children. His family moved to Perth and then to London where teenager Oswald became a Christian under the preaching of Charles Spurgeon.

He really had his sights set on being an artist and went to the Royal College of Art in London and then on to Edinburgh University to study psychology and philosophy as well as art. But when he ran out of money and couldn't fund his studies, he realised that maybe art wasn't the career for him. God had something better.

So he attended a small Bible College in Dunoon and spent the next nine years as a student there and later a lecturer. All the time he was honing his preaching skills and became well-known as a brilliant communicator, especially to young people.

During his time in Dunoon, Oswald spent four dark, soul-searching years which ended with what we might call nowadays a charismatic experience. He was renewed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

For four years, 1911–1915, Oswald Chambers founded and was Principal of the Bible Training College in Clapham, London, training young men and women for missionary service abroad.

During that period Oswald travelled widely overseas and was especially appreciated in the USA where he is now regarded in the same league as C S Lewis as an inspirational writer and deep thinker.

Which is ironic, because Oswald Chambers never ‘wrote’ a book at all! His gifted wife Bidy was an extremely fast stenographer and took down every

spoken word of her husband at 250 words a minute in shorthand.

After his death in 1917, she spent the rest of her life extracting and arranging nuggets from her notes and editing the works for publication. She held the copyright to his works which are now curated by the Oswald Chambers Publications Association.

32 books are attributed to Oswald Chambers, now translated into over 40 languages. His golden book, the daily devotional classic 'My Utmost For His Highest' was first published in the UK in 1927 and has sold over 13 million copies worldwide, ten million in the last 20 years.

'My Utmost' is read by hundreds of thousands every day in hardback, paperback and digitally on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Google 'Oswald Chambers' or 'My Utmost' to see how

just widely his writings are loved and appreciated on social media. There is a huge and growing online fan-base for this stimulating centenarian.

Oswald Chambers died in the desert after complications following an operation to remove his appendix. He had accepted the challenge to help the WW1 war effort as a YMCA chaplain serving the Anzac troops in Egypt following the Gallipoli disaster. He prepared young men spiritually for both life and death.

The proof that his teaching was and is so valuable lies in the testimonies of the millions who have found in Oswald Chambers' writings the hallmark of practical truth for living the Christian life.

'My Utmost for His Highest' was published this month in the Bulgarian language to celebrate his life and legacy

one hundred years after Oswald Chambers died.

8 things you didn't know about Christmas

Paul Kerensa

I love Christmas. I suspect my wife now hates it, since I started writing this book on Christmas history. Here are eight of my favourite festive facts that made Mrs Kerensa roll her eyes . . .

1. KING HEROD HAD A WIFE CALLED DORIS. He had 10 wives (not all at the same time), including a Cleopatra and two Mariamnes. He killed one wife, and her mother, after making them testify against each other, and he drowned his teenage brother-in-law at a party. Herod was so worried that people wouldn't mourn him (and they wouldn't

– he was a terror), that he ordered the death of much-loved locals, as soon as news spread of his own demise – that way people would really have something to cry about. Thankfully, soldiers tasked with carrying out this wish decided not to, when Herod finally passed. No reported tears were shed.

2. THERE WAS NO DONKEY IN THE NATIVITY STORY. Sorry kids. It makes a great outfit for the primary school, and to be honest it makes sense – pregnant Mary had to get from Nazareth to Bethlehem somehow. It's just there's not one mentioned and she could have just as easily travelled by horse or cart. There is of course a donkey towards the end of Jesus' life, on Palm Sunday, so perhaps a donkey at the start (with its cross-shape in the hairs on its back) is a perfect narrative mirror. We like the song Little Donkey of course, though the song's writer (Geordie folk-singer

Eric Boswell) preferred his more humorous animal songs, such as I've Got a Little Whippet.

3. JINGLE BELLS WAS A THANKSGIVING SONG. And written for a church. And the first song in space. Whoa. Too much. But yes – it was written for a church Sunday school to keep the children entertained during Thanksgiving 1857. Its galactic debut was a century later, and part of a space prank. Astronauts Wally Schirra and Thomas P Stafford sent a message from Gemini 6 to Mission Control reporting ‘ . . . an object, looks like a satellite going from north to south, probably in polar orbit . . . I see a command module and eight smaller modules in front. The pilot of the command module is wearing a red suit . . . ’ They then broke into song, backed by a harmonica and sleigh bells they'd somehow smuggled on board.

4. DON'T BLAME MODERN SECULARISM FOR AMERICA'S 'HOLIDAY SEASON' – BLAME CROMWELL. Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas in England in the 1640s, and while it came back a decade and a half later, the Puritans who sailed for America managed a longer ban, even if it wasn't countrywide. Christmas failed to get a footing in the New World and while some churches celebrated it, they couldn't agree if it was a feast day, a fast day or a normal day. So Thanksgiving snuck in, like Harvest Festival but with a better origin story about hungry pilgrims, firmly embedding it in American culture. Christmas eventually became popular, but by the 20th century it sat alongside Thanksgiving, Jewish Hanukkah and African American Kwanzaa. You could argue that the 'holiday season' covers Christian festivals from Advent to Epiphany, really it represents the fact

that the American Christmas was a little late to the holiday party.

5. ST NICHOLAS WAS THE FIRST TO USE AN AUTOMATIC DOOR. According to legend, so holy was the bishop, that when he visited the Room of the Last Supper, the church doors swung open to greet him. Nicholas was even a pious baby: tales tell of him abstaining from breastfeeding on the two customary fasting days each week, and the infant would only take from the right breast, as he was so loyal to God's right hand.

6. THE MAN WHO POPULARISED SANTA ALSO BROUGHT US GOTHAM CITY AND THE KNICKERBOCKER GLORY. Washington Irving was the world's first international bestselling author, penning *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. He also wrote a spoof history of New York under the pseudonym *Diedrich Knickerbocker* (inspiring the famous dessert, plus the English nickname for

ladies' undergarments, thanks to UK illustrations not in the US version). The book told of the Dutch settlers' favourite saint – Nicholas – flying over treetops 'in that self-same wagon wherein he brings his yearly presents to children'. Irving also wrote a travelogue of a trip to England, dropping in at the Nottinghamshire village of Gotham. He nicknamed New York 'Gotham City', long before Batman moved in. That Midlands trip also featured a Christmas stay in a Birmingham manor house and Irving's cosy account of his festive stay inspired Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

7. THANK DICKENS AND THE MINI ICE AGE FOR OUR 'WHITE CHRISTMAS'. The first eight Christmases of Dickens' life were white ones. The Thames froze, and 1816 was so cold that it was known as 'The year without summer', or 'Eighteen hundred and froze to death'. That summer was so bad that Byron's writing

retreat was rained off, so he encouraged his guests to write scary stories: Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein, John Polidori wrote the first vampire fiction. Dickens was only four, but grew up to remember those snowy winters, making them the backdrop to Scrooge's Christmas. By contrast, A Christmas Carol was released during one of the mildest Decembers on record – so readers harked back to the ones they used to know . . .

8. ONE BISHOP GAVE US 'NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS', A CLASSIC CHRISTMAS GHOST STORY AND LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY. Bishop Edward Benson, later Archbishop of Canterbury, noted in 1880 that Christmas had become a boozy occasion. To lure drunks from pubs to Cornwall's nearly-built Truro Cathedral, he created a new Christmas Eve carol service. He also had the idea for ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*, written up

by his friend Henry James. And while he didn't pen Land of Hope and Glory himself, his son did; another son wrote the Mapp and Lucia novels. His main influence though? To revive interest in glorious hearty carol-singing – and putting it back in church.

[Paul Kerensa is author of 'Hark! The Biography of Christmas', published in 2017 by Lion Hudson, £7.99.]

