

King of Kings

Joshua 12

Passages like Joshua 12 can seem like reading the phone book. We need to know why the Holy Spirit chose to include it in the inspired pages of Scripture for our benefit. This record of conquered kings proves the Lord kept His promises. How much more will He keep them for us?

Summary of the Text

The record of defeated kings begins on the east, "on the other side of the Jordan toward the rising of the sun" (v. 1). Sihon king of the Amorites possessed the southern half of the Transjordan, and the enormous Og king of Bashan held the northern territory (vv. 2-5; cf. Deut. 3:11). Moses the Lord's servant and the people of Israel conquered this area and gave it to the Reubenites, Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh (v. 6). On this side, the west side of the Jordan, Joshua conquered thirty-one kings, one by one (vv. 7-24). A Scripture-reading Israel would never forget the strength and number of the peoples they overcame by the grace of God in the promise land.

One Israel

The story of the conquest goes back a generation to Sihon and Og when Moses defeated them (Num. 21:21-35). The Lord is faithful in every generation and those in the present stand on the shoulders of those who came before. Although Moses did not enter the land of promise, his faithfulness east of the Jordan overcame these mighty kings. Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh must not be forgotten or considered less than the rest of Israel as they feared might happen (22:21-29). And east-of-Jordan Israel must not isolate themselves. As obvious as these challenges in Israel may seem to us, the divisions in the church today are not well understood. All believers in Christ share "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:5-6). We are fundamentally united by our triune God and we agree on primary doctrines. Yet sinful divisions occur when Christians lack love and care for one another. Denominations are a blessing and a necessity. We don't want a central administration (!) or to all meet at one address. But it's not good to exclude one another from communion, to not pray for one another, and to refuse to strive for like-mindedness (Eph. 4:13). In the New Testament we see class divisions (Jms. 2:1-9), theological and factional pride (1 Cor. 3:4-9), and cultural contempt (Gal. 2:11-19). But in Christ there is "neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11). We are growing up into Him and should be glad the Lord is among those Gadites even if we disagree with their Arminianism (cf. Matt. 9:38-41).

Promises Kept

Similar to the way biblical genealogies catalogue the goodness of God from one generation to the next, this list of conquered kings shows His faithfulness to keep His promises. These kings and victories become part of Israel's sung history: "He defeated many nations and slew mighty kings—Sihon king of the Amorites, Og king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan—and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to Israel His people" (Ps. 135:10-12; cf. Ps. 136:19-20). Calvin: "But though each of those now summarily mentioned was previously given more in detail, there is a very good reason for here placing before our eyes as it were a living picture of the goodness of God, proving that there had been a complete ratification and performance of the covenant made with Abraham as given in the words, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land.'" Four hundred years earlier the Lord promised Abraham: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites" (Gen. 15:18-21). When it came true, Joshua wrote it down.

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The ancient Apostle's Creed, which we recite most Lord's Days, states that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate." This Roman governor is part of the story of Christ's victory and so he makes it into our confession of faith. Believing that God is the Lord of time where real people inhabit real places, we ought to include specifics in our prayers. It's good to thank God for the food and weather, but also for the burger on Wednesday and the snow flurry on Friday. Christians who drift from the Lord must distance themselves from the reality of His daily faithfulness. We can apply this to personal deliverance (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13) as well as ecclesiastical and national providences. Abraham "did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness'" (Rom. 4:20-21).

Christ the King

Why is Pontius Pilate named in the Apostles' Creed? How does the one who presided over the execution of the King of kings get mentioned in the confession of faith? The cross is the power of God, the power of His mercy and His judgment on the world. Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, each and every person deserves His judgment. It's not that we're imperfect, as if we occasionally don't do exactly the right thing but our hearts are in the right place: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside'" (Rom. 3:9-12). We are Canaanites and judgment has been pronounced against us. But Christ died in our place, even the shameful death of the Roman cross. Because He was innocent of sin and truly righteous, the wrath of God was satisfied. The grave couldn't hold Him and so He defeated death by resurrecting from the dead in human history for all to hear and believe. Everyone must reckon with the risen Christ. Christians too often think of the resurrection as a passive truth and invitation. It's true that Jesus allowed them to crucify Him, but in doing so He knew He was crushing the Devil, his servants, their works and effects: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (Jn. 12:31-32). Jesus doesn't merely wish or blindly hope that the cross will take effect; He accomplished the salvation of the world. The Father promised not to leave His soul in Sheol or allow His holy one to see corruption but raised Him up with power and declared Him to be His Son by His resurrection from the dead (Ps. 16:10; Rom. 1:4). Jesus is the greater Joshua, the King of kings and Lord of lords. God calls all the kings and all in authority to kiss the Son, to submit to Him, to do justice on the earth, and to seek His mercy and grace (Ps. 2:7-10). Many have: Tiridates of Armenia (301), Constantine of Rome (337), Mirian III of Iberia (337), Clovis of the Franks (496), Æthelberht of Kent (601), Redwald of East Anglia (604), Mojmir I of Moravia (818), Boris I of Bulgaria (864), Guthrum of Denmark/East Anglia (878), Vladimir I of Kiev (980s), Olaf Haraldsson of Norway (1014), and Afonso I of Kongo (1491). These truths were once known in our land. It's possible by the preaching of the gospel, and only by the preaching of the gospel, that we will know them again and worship the King of kings.