

***You Pick The Sermon: Why Does Scripture Contain So Many Wars – Is God a Warmonger?***

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***Isaiah 2:1-4, Colossians 1:13-23, John 18:33-38***

Our final Scripture reading this evening is John 18:33-38. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy word. "Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him.""

Most of our You Pick The Sermon topics have been really fun for me. You've all chosen some great subjects. I enjoyed sharing my own resources for spiritual growth last week; I loved researching the links between Genesis and Revelation several weeks ago. But not every question for the series is easy or comfortable. The next two weeks, we'll deal with the hardest questions you asked me to handle. They are bigger than what I can deal with in my 20-25 minutes. It's my hope and prayer that we'll get through the major hurdles these questions cause for faith and leave the subtle details for another time.

Today's question has bothered us ever since Jesus came on the scene...why does Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, contain so many wars? Is God a warmonger? The church wrestled with this in the mid-second century, when the idea arose that the supposedly violent god of the Old Testament couldn't be the loving god of the New Testament. It's not new.

And there's no point in debating that there's a lot of violence in Scripture. Many years ago, some of us studied a shortened version of the Bible called *The Story*, and a fair chunk of people stopped reading during the warfare of Israel's kings. That violence can be gruesome and grotesque, the stuff of R-rated movies, not the gentle Bible stories we prefer to remember.

So let's deal with that first. Whenever you deal with this question, I want you to remember this: *the Bible is a divinely inspired historical record of God's self-revelation and God's people*. God inspired the authors to write every word they wrote. Every word that's in there, God intended to be there. *However, just because God inspired the authors to write down history doesn't mean He approved of that history*. Huge chunks of the Bible describe the sinfulness and depravity of humanity – God's people the Israelites, all the surrounding nations, the Romans, everybody. It doesn't mean that God approved of what they did. It means that God wanted their evil actions to be known so that His own actions would make sense in context.

The Bible is unique amongst ancient historical records in being very critical of the history of the Israelites. Kings whitewashed their own histories, erasing their defeats and exaggerating their victories. Experts question whether the Israelites were ever in Egypt because Egyptian history contains no record of a successful slave rebellion. And why would it? Why would a king record his greatest failure? (It's funny that Egyptian history contains no record of the building of the pyramids, either, one of the ancient wonders of the world. Why would there be no record unless their construction would reveal something the Pharaohs wanted hidden?)

In comparison, the Bible is highly critical of Israel's leadership. The Bible describes how every king over the northern kingdom of Israel was evil, and about two-thirds of the kings of the southern kingdom of Israel were evil too! God often condemns the actions of His people, even when they were successful by earthly standards. So first, we always have to look and see whether or not what the Bible relates is what the Bible encourages. A huge amount of the violence the Bible describes, God condemns.

Here's the next thing we should keep in mind: *there is only one straightforwardly offensive war that God endorses, and that is the taking of the land of Israel which God promised to the Jews.* It might be helpful for us to understand the size of Israel in terms we can understand. The country of Israel at its largest in history could fit in the Upper Peninsula twice. Metro Detroit could only fit into Israel a little more than twice. It is not large. All the wars recorded in Scripture that God blesses in any way have two purposes: either to gain the full kingdom promised to Abraham, because Joshua's men didn't complete the task, or to defend the territory God had given them.

Scripture contains a bunch of wars because the people surrounding Israel constantly attacked her. Israel was fertile ground, a land flowing with milk and honey. It's a tiny piece of property, but one that stood between all the core trade routes in the ancient world. It was and still is incredibly strategic. And so the Israelites found themselves defending against their enemies over and over again.

For example, in the time of the Judges, Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. God allowed the Israelites to be oppressed because they turned away from Him; then God raised up champions to lead them out of oppression. While God allowed His people to go to war, it was to kick out the invading parties that had attempted to conquer them and to bring His people back to Himself. The book of Judges shows a terrible cycle – one judge would bring peace, the judge would die, the people would forget God, they would be oppressed, and then they would cry out to the Lord. They never understood that lasting peace would only come from continually trusting in God.

God also establishes a vision of His holy Kingdom to come where war would be a thing of the past. We heard it described in Isaiah 2, but it's all over the Old Testament. In the last days, God will judge the nations and settle all disputes. Swords and spears will be useless and made into farm tools. Nobody will go to basic training! There won't be a need. God's promises of peace began with Adam and Eve, promising that one day, a savior would come and crush the serpent of sin and death and evil. God's promise of peace did not just come with Jesus; it's always been part of God's plan.

Of course, it's through Jesus that the promise of peace has its ultimate fulfillment. As Paul says in Colossians, through Jesus' blood shed on the cross, God has made peace with us who were once at war with Him. We are now reconciled to Him; the treaty has been drawn up. As we continue in faith, we are accepted as members of God's Kingdom and part of His family.

That peace is not just metaphorical, either. There have been plenty of wars over the last 2000 years, some fought over religion and even Christianity. But Jesus brings us peace. As Jesus told Pilate, His Kingdom is not of this world. He will one day come to establish His Kingdom here permanently. But His Kingdom is not spread through violence. It comes as we share His love and grace with others. Christianity spread throughout the Roman world as Christians, despite overwhelming persecution, cared for the least, the last, and the lost.

But that still leaves one big question for us: why does God command and even bring about death? Why does He order the Israelites to kill everyone in Canaan, including women and children? Why does God kill the firstborn of the Egyptians so Pharaoh will let His people leave Egypt? We need to face this question more than any others. Most of us would agree that some wars are just. World War II, for example, was fought to stop the rise of Nazism and fascism; not everything the Allies did was morally positive, but there was no doubt a great evil had to be stopped. When God tells His people to eliminate the Canaanites or when He kills the firstborn throughout Egypt, we aren't so worried about God being warlike, because some wars are justifiable. We worry that God is morally compromised. Why isn't He a moral monster?

*Here's why: God did not introduce death into the world, but He governs the life and death of everyone.* Whether it happens in peacetime or war, through violence or disease, old age or tragedy, God is sovereign over death – nothing happens without His permission. The key from the story of Adam and Eve is that humanity is ultimately responsible for sin, evil, suffering, and death entering into the world. Before they rebelled against God's only law, these things weren't a part of the equation. Once they do enter the scene, God takes total control of them, allowing only what is necessary for His plans to come to fruition.

In the conquest of Canaan and the plagues against Egypt, God works directly to control the situation rather than indirectly. We are bothered because God states what we already know from Scripture – that He is in charge of all this. We would prefer a world without suffering and death, but we chose death in the garden, and none of Adam's descendants chose otherwise.

No option is easy – would we prefer to focus on God killing the firstborn of the Egyptians in order that Pharaoh finally lets the Hebrews leave, or would we prefer to focus on how Egypt enslaved the Hebrews, put them to hard labor, and began slaughtering their male children when they grew into a huge community under God's blessing? None of it is pleasant, but God is just. His punishment against the Egyptians, as harsh as it seems, is just considering the sinfulness of the Egyptians against His people and their planned genocide of the Hebrews.

And let's look at the campaign to take Canaan. Yes, God commands them to destroy every living thing. In our day, we have the idea of civilians, of non-combatants who are innocent bystanders, and so we take the deliberate killing of women and children to be beyond the pale. But God is neither cruel nor unjust.

Why not? First, the Canaanites knew what was coming. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham back in Genesis 15, 500 years before the Exodus of Abraham's descendants from Egypt. The reason that God did not immediately allow Abraham's family to take over Canaan earlier was that, according to God, their sinfulness had not reached its full measure.

The Canaanites had been warned for 500 years that the God of Abraham had promised him the land. For forty years before the invasion of Canaan, the Israelites had been on the doorstep of Canaan wandering in the wilderness to the south! When Joshua sends spies into the city of Jericho, they are harbored by a prostitute and innkeeper called Rahab. She tells them the people have melted with fear because they had heard word of their miraculous escape from Egypt and their successes against marauders in the wilderness. They knew what was coming, yet they did nothing. But Rahab's story proved that anyone who would repent and turn to God for salvation would be accepted in Israel. Rahab becomes part of the line of King David, and eventually Jesus Himself. God accepted Canaanites who repented of their sin! The Canaanites could have been saved!

But the Canaanites were incredibly wicked. They worshipped Baal and his consorts, three sacred prostitutes who represented sexuality and war. One, Anath, celebrated sadism and violent cruelty. Canaanite religion required participation in temple prostitution. They sacrificed their children to Molech, a god who required human sacrifice. They were so wicked, I can't discuss some of it in polite company! And what's more, archeologists have found religious writings from Canaan proving what the Bible says about their wickedness was completely true!

The Canaanites were wicked, yet God spared them for hundreds of years until His justice can no longer bear their sin. God uses Israel as a tool of His justice. He tells them not to spare any Canaanites because if they intermarry with the Hebrews, they will introduce their religious beliefs to them and wind up corrupting Israel. And that's exactly what happens. But is it moral of God, who commands us not to commit murder, to order the deaths of women and children? There are many parts to this answer, and not all of them may satisfy you. I won't go over them all today. But there are two core reasons I believe the answer is yes, it was moral of God.

*First, God's justice requires all human beings to suffer death as a result of our rebellion against Him.* It is not only moral but right that He does this because without death, wickedness has no end. Age and gender don't exempt us from this truth. And death is not God's fault; it's ours, through our choices. Every part of our world is corrupted by sin. Children are more innocent than their parents but are still corrupt. At no point do we deserve life instead of death. God, in His mercy and grace, allows us to live in spite of our sin and rebellion because He loves us. He is patient with us. But God is never unjust by allowing the death of anyone.

*Second, the morality of the conquest of Canaan must be seen in light of ancient wartime practice.* When ancient nations went to war, there were no rules. There was no Geneva Convention banning the use of certain kinds of weapons or protecting medics. And when two nations went to war, the common practice was to kill the men, to enslave the boys and make them do heavy labor, and to make the women and girls into concubines, prostitutes, or worse.

What's surprising about Israel's takeover of Canaan is that they rarely receive any spoils of war. When they destroy Jericho, it includes the livestock and property. Even the gold and silver are placed in the Lord's treasury. The Israelites receive no personal gain from Jericho's destruction...no slaves, no property, no currency. They only receive the land itself. So we are left with a difficult thought: is death in the hands of a both just and grace-filled God more merciful than perpetual slavery and exploitation? It seems far more gracious than the ongoing torture the Israelites would have experienced at the hands of the Canaanites.

This is not an easy subject to talk about. But there's a final thought I want to leave you with today. *The reason we have this conversation about whether or not the violence God commands in the Old Testament is moral is because that same God sent His Son to us in order to bring us peace and to teach us a new way of life.* Jesus was with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit when the world began, when His people were enslaved, when Canaan was full of the most brutal idol worship imaginable. His human life, death, and resurrection ushered in the new era that God had promised through the prophets over and over again – that violence would end, that peace would come, and that His Kingdom would arrive.

We wonder why the violence in the Old Testament was necessary because God Himself taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We question God's use of force because God taught us not to treat life casually. Without the moral teaching of both the Old and New Testament, we would have no basis to think that war is not only avoidable but a last resort; we would not have the concept of sparing women and children, who had little value in ancient societies. Our whole worldview, including our morality about violence, comes from God's own teaching that we should avoid violence and embrace the peace that His Son brings.

We do not understand everything God has done or ordered His people to do over the years. What we do see throughout Scripture is that God is both merciful and just. In His Son Jesus, we know that God's mercy outstrips His justice, that God waits a long time for us to turn to Him and find forgiveness in His name. As the Scripture says, God wants none to perish but all to turn to Him. May we turn today and know His grace instead of His judgment.