**God Behaving Badly – Week 4 – Violent or Peaceful**

**Message Big Idea**: When we read certain stories in the Old Testament, it’s hard not to wonder… Is God violent or peaceful?

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 20:16-18, Joshua 11:11-12

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**Introduction: God Behaving Badly**

(Series Graphic) Have you ever come across a passage in the Bible where it seems like God is behaving badly? I know I have. Sometimes I read stories and they are confusing, disturbing, and outright crazy. Here are a few examples…

* (2 Kings 2:23-24) There’s a story in the Old Testament where some boys are making fun of a prophet’s baldness, so the prophet calls down a curse on the young men and a couple of bears come out of the woods and maul the boys. Confusing!
* (2 Kings 19:35) Or another story where the Angel of the Lord slaughters 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Disturbing!
* (Deuteronomy 20:17) Or another passage where God commands the people of Israel to totally wipe out whole people groups. Outright crazy!

These texts aren’t just embarrassing; they’re horrifying! These are the stories I hope people don’t ever bring up because I don’t know what to do with them.

In fact, many of us attempt to minimize or even dismiss these stories altogether. Whatever is happening here doesn’t fit with the God we see in Jesus so we sidestep these stories with statements like:

* “Who are we to question God?” or
* “We can’t understand God.” or
* “The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

However, it can be stories just like these that cause many people to not want anything to do with the God of the Old Testament. And I can understand that. If you start reading the Bible in Genesis, the God you find there might shock you. The stories in these ancient writings lead some to believe that God is harsh, unfair, and cruel. But alongside these passages where God appears to be behaving badly are stories of God’s love, goodness, and mercy. How do we make sense of a God like this?

**Series Recap**

There’s a part of me that wants to look the other direction when I come across these stories. But instead of looking away, during this series we’ve been looking intently into them. We’ve wrestled with some difficult questions, and today we’re asking: Is God **Violent or Peaceful?**

As a reminder, during this series, we’re using the personal name for God, Yahweh, that is the primary way he is referred to in the Old Testament. We believe that it is significant that he is most often referred to as “Yahweh,” rather than simply “God” because it tells us something about the kind of intimacy he desires with his people. There is something personal about calling someone by their first name, isn’t there? Yahweh desires that kind of intimacy with us. And this is important because what we believe about God will directly affect how we either pursue him or avoid him. I find it interesting that the people in the Old Testament who knew Yahweh best desperately desired to be close to him. What did they understand about him that we can uncover?

So let’s get started. Is Yahweh violent or peaceful?

**Yahweh Commands the Destruction of the Canaanites**

The truth is that the Old Testament has several graphic depictions of violence and many of them are very troubling.

Today we are going to focus on one violent section of scripture that I think may be the most problematic and the hardest for us to understand: The conquest of the Canaanites as recorded in the Old Testament.

If you’ve never come across this story, let me give you some background to make sure we’re all up to speed… *(Build a timeline graphic)*

* *(Slaves in Egypt)* For over 400 years, all of Yahweh’s people, the Israelites, were slaves under the harsh and oppressive rule of the Egyptian empire. The conditions were horrendous, and it was not uncommon for an Israelite to be worked to death or even beaten to death. We also know that, at least once, the Egyptians tried to “thin out” the Israelite population by killing all the male Israelite babies.
* *(Moses and the Exodus)* So in the context of this incredible oppression, Yahweh’s people cried out for help, and he sent them a man named Moses to lead them out of slavery. The Exodus is the story of Yahweh delivering his people out of Egypt to a land where they could finally be free. And not just any land…it was THE land that he had promised to their ancestors.
* *(The Promised Land)* After a crazy, 40-year journey through the desert, the people of Israel finally reach the Promised Land under their new leader, Joshua. BUT!!!! There is a major problem: The Canaanite people are already living there!

This brings us to what I think are the most troubling scenes in the Bible. We don’t have time to look at each of these scenes, but let’s look at two passages that frame this entire section of scripture so we can try to understand and respond to it.

The first is found in Deuteronomy 20. These are Yahweh’s shocking instructions to Moses on how to handle this Canaanite situation:

**“In those towns that the Lord your God is giving you as a special possession, destroy every living thing. You must completely destroy the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, just as the Lord your God has commanded you.This will prevent the people of the land from teaching you to imitate their detestable customs in the worship of their gods, which would cause you to sin deeply against the Lord your God.” –Deuteronomy 20:16-18**

Then in the Book of Joshua these commands are carried out as summarized in Joshua 11:

**“The Israelites completely destroyed every living thing in the city, leaving no survivors. Not a single person was spared. And then Joshua burned the city. Joshua slaughtered all the other kings and their people, completely destroying them, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, had commanded.” –Joshua 11:11-12**

Yikes! This is some scary stuff. I mean, if this doesn't bother you…please see someone about that!

Think about it…Hitler tried to do something similar in WWII…Is God like that?!?!

This issue is one of the biggest struggles I (Ted) have had in my faith. How am I supposed to make sense of all of this?

And I know I am not alone in this struggle which why I think this is a very important conversation for us to have as a church. We need to take it very seriously. If you are here today carrying these weighty questions in your mind and heart, I want you to know that you have come to the right place!  You are not only welcome to ask your questions here, you are in good company!

One of the big reasons we gather to celebrate every Sunday in services and connect in small groups throughout the week is to support and encourage each other through life’s hard questions…even questions like this one.

Now, I don’t plan on wrapping up all our emotional and intellectual issues with violence in the Old Testament today, BUT I have discovered some arguments and explanations that have helped me make some sense of all of this and have given me peace in this area…intellectually AND emotionally. There are a constellation of arguments that **together** have bolstered my faith and understanding, and I want to briefly highlight 5 of them for us today.

If you want to check all of this out in more depth, there are 2 books I want to recommend. First, the book that has shaped this series: (Picture) ***God Behaving Badly* by David Lamb**. (Add Picture) And second, ***The God I Don’t Understand* by Christopher Wright**. Both of these resources have helped me wrestle through these tough questions.

So are you ready? We’re going to cover a lot of ground here so buckle up! … Let’s Go!

**5 Arguments about Violence in the OT**

The first point we should consider about these passages involving the Canaanites is… *(Build a list with each point)*

***1.*** ***Yahweh has been very patient with the Canaanites.***

God is very explicit that the reason he is taking the land from the Canaanite nations is because he is judging these nations—for all sorts of things, including exploitation of the poor, misuse of the land, and especially their brutal religious practices that involved explicit sexual acts and child sacrifice.

And these evil acts have been going on for a long time. 400 years earlier, Yahweh told Abraham, “I would give you this land right now, but I’m going to give the people of the land more time. In 400 years, their sin will have reached a point of no return, and then I will judge them.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Yahweh waits for centuries before saying, “Enough is enough.”

And I think it is important to note that Yahweh then hold Israel to the same standard as the Canaanites. After the Israelites possess the land, Yahweh gives them clear instructions on how they are to live (Leviticus 18:28) and warns them that if they follow the same path as the Canaanites and fall into evil ways, they will suffer the same consequences and be driven out themselves.

*(Return to point 1 slide)* So the first point to consider is that Yahweh was very patient with the Canaanites, but they persisted in their evil behavior.

Second… *(add to list)*

***2.*** ***Israel attacks military targets, not civilian centers.***

In the book of Joshua, the cities that Israel attacks are all primarily strategic military targets, not places with massive civilian populations.[[2]](#endnote-2)

*(Joshua 6:2-4)* For example, maybe you’ve heard the story of Joshua conquering the city of Jericho. Yahweh instructs his people to march around the city once a day for 6 days. Then, on the seventh day, to march around the city 7 times, blowing their trumpets, and the city will fall.

The Biblical city of Jericho was a military stronghold that was about 4-5 acres in size, which probably housed less than 200 soldiers. Think about it, you would not be able to walk around the border of Chicago even once in a day, let alone 7 times in one day like the Israelites did to Jericho.

*(Return to point slide)* So targets like Jericho were more like military targets than civilian centers.

Third… *(add to list)*

***3.*** ***This is not the strong fighting for Yahweh. This is Yahweh fighting for the weak.***

Remember, Israel is a group of recently freed slaves. They don’t have a professional army. They don’t have advanced weapons. You should not imagine the Romans or Alexander the Great or some imperialistic power taking over some weak population. In every respect, the nations they are battling are their military superiors.

In the battles in the Bible, Israel does things that are strategically stupid. Think about some of the tactics Israel uses:

* Joshua marching around walls and blowing trumpets.
* Gideon’s tactic was to instruct his 300 soldiers to smash pots.
* Jesoshaphat’s army marched around while singing a song.

These battles are not the strong kid against a wimpy kid. They are more like the wimpy kid taking on an NFL team with a whiffle bat. The only reason Israel wins is because Yahweh fights for them.

Fourth… *(add to list)*

***4.***   ***The language of total destruction is standard battle rhetoric.***

When the Bible uses language like, “they utterly destroyed them,” or “they left no survivors,” we need to recognize that this is typical war “trash talk” from the ancient world.

This is how any decisive victory was described. It is like someone recapping a victory by their favorite sports team saying, “They slaughtered them!” or “They crushed them!” This is strong language to communicate a decisive victory—not a literal account of how many people died.

To show you what I mean, take a look at this verse from Joshua 11. Here we read:

**“So Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses…” –Joshua 11:23**

Total victory, right? The Israelites took the entire land. However, flip just two chapters to Joshua 13 and you find this:

*(add)* **“When Joshua had grown old, the Lord said to him, ‘You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.’” –Joshua 13:1**

If you pay attention in the Bible, the very people that are said to have been “utterly destroyed” often show up a few pages later continuing to cause trouble for Israel.

And it’s important to remember that Scripture is a story recounting parts of world history. We read of these epic battles, but there are lots of times of peace in between them. Think about it. No one ever writes much about times of peace. You don’t turn on cable TV and hear, “Breaking news…everything’s fine,” or “This just in…everybody’s happy.”

*(Return to point slide)* What we are reading here are Israel’s battle stories, and they do contain battle rhetoric.

The final point… *(add to list)*

***5.***    ***Yahweh has the right and is right to judge evil.***

Here is the most important thing, and it is the hardest one for most of us to swallow. We may not like that Yahweh judged the Canaanites, but we have to acknowledge that if there is a God, he is completely within his right to judge evil. He alone knew the hearts of the Canaanites, and he acted within his rights to judge them.

If you ask the average person, “Who goes to heaven?” “Who does God accept?” you typically get one of two answers. They either say, “Everybody” or “Good people.” And both of those answers have serious problems.

If you say that everyone gets in with God—that all people, no matter what they have done are on God’s good side—then you end up believing in a God who doesn’t care about anything. You end up believing in a God who doesn’t care about the evil in the world. He doesn’t care…

* When the rich exploit the poor.
* When children are abused.
* When human beings are trafficked like slaves.

A God who doesn’t judge is a God who doesn’t care.

But if you say that God ***does*** care about evil, then Yahweh has the right and is right to judge that evil. And in this case, his judgment came against the Canaanites.

Even with all the points we’ve discussed, it can be hard to digest these stories. Yes, sometimes Yahweh used violence in his judgment. But I want us to understand this today: Just because Yahweh used violence doesn’t mean he prefers violence. **Yahweh prefers peace.**

**Yahweh Prefers Peace**

In fact, if we look again at the conquest of the Canaanites, we find that Yahweh’s desire wasn’t to wipe all of them out. In the midst of all the violence we find in this section of Scripture, (Joshua 2:1) we find the story of Rahab, a prostitute. She was a Canaanite, a resident of Jericho. Before invading Jericho, Joshua sent spies into the city to scout the city, and Rahab helped them. Had it not been for her help, the spies would have been captured and killed. (Joshua 6:25) And because of what she did, Rahab and all her family were spared and she lived at peace among the Israelites for years to come.

Recognize, that Yahweh’s kindness and faithfulness to Rahab aren’t outliers. All over the Old Testament there are examples showing that Yahweh prefers peace.

* *(1 Samuel 26:9)* David, called a man after God’s own heart, could have killed his rival on multiple occasions but didn’t do it because he knew God would rather spare Saul.
* *(Jonah 3:10)* Jonah wanted nothing but the worst for his enemies, the Assyrians, but God sent Jonah to them to proclaim God’s love and promises to this wicked people. In the end, thousands upon thousands of Assyrians turned to God.
* *(Proverbs 25:21)* The idea of loving your enemies can be found all the way back in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

Yahweh prefers peace. He always prefers peace. And the ultimate proof of that came centuries after the story of the Canaanites. The ultimate proof came when God, himself, was willing to be a victim of violence.

**Jesus, the Peacemaker**

The greatest war that has ever been waged in the history of the universe is Yahweh’s fight for us. It’s angels and demons. Good and evil. Light and darkness. When we were in danger of being conquered by evil, God came and conquered evil.

The real issue that we have to wrestle with today is that every one of us has participated in the evil in this world. Every one of us has contributed. And because God has the right to judge evil, we have a problem. If God is going to be a good God, he has to be against all evil, including the evil we do.

(Romans 7:18-19) We have all failed at being “good people.” Like the Apostle Paul, we have to admit that we often don’t do the good we want to do.

All of us have sinned.

All of us have done evil.

And that is a scary place to be.

But here is the remarkable, incredible, unfathomable truth: Because of Jesus, we don’t have to be afraid.

Jesus brought peace to this war once and for all by winning it. And the thing that shocks me is that he didn’t do it by keeping all of the bullets from flying. Instead, Jesus stepped directly into the crossfire. Every shot that was destined for us found him instead. Jesus was wounded and pierced for us. God, himself, became a victim of violence.

The Apostle Paul declares:

**“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” –Colossians 1:19-20**

Because of Jesus, we do not have to be afraid. Jesus has brought us peace.

God does care about the problem of evil, and he did something about it. The problem with me is that I talk about evil like it’s somewhere else. When the reality is that evil is right here in this room, because evil is in me. Evil is in us. The war still seems to rage within us. I’m the weak one, and if it’s up to me, evil overcomes. But the truth is that God fights for the weak and offers peace, because Yahweh has always been the God of peace.

No matter how you might struggle with some of these difficult stories in the Bible, please know this: Yahweh prefers peace, Jesus offers peace, because he has always been the God of peace.

**Communion Idea**

In Jesus last days before he died, he told his disciples that he was leaving the world to go back to the Father. He told them that they would all be scattered and leave him all alone. Can you imagine what it was like to hear that from Jesus’ lips? Can you imagine being there to hear it? He’s going to die and we, his disciples, will abandon him. Could anything be more perplexing and unpeaceful than that? But then the conversation took an unexpected turn. Jesus said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.” Even facing the worst possible future, Jesus spoke peace over his followers. As we remember Jesus’ sacrifice, may we worship him for the violence he endured, because it is by his wounds that we are healed.

1. Genesis 15:16 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Reference: *Skeletons in God's Closet* p.226 by Joshua Ryan Butler [↑](#endnote-ref-2)