

A few years ago I got a call from my grandmother with a Bible question. She has been a Christian since she was 18 or so. When I lived with her throughout my teenage years, I would wake up in the morning and she would have been awake for hours praying and reading her Bible. Through the years she has found great comfort in its words, learned from its pages, and prayed it over and over again.

When I heard the question, I was really surprised I hadn't gotten it earlier...

She had been reading and praying through the Psalms when she came to Psalm 137:8-9

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.  
Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.

She wanted to know if she was reading it correctly! Was this God's blessing on people who dashed Babylonian babies against the rocks?!?

She was finally questioning what so many others have questioned through the years... what about all the violence in the Old Testament; especially when read in connection to Jesus Christ as the representative of God in the New Testament.

Men and women both inside and outside the church have struggled with this...

In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins refers to the God of the Old Testament as "a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser." Journalist Christopher Hitchens complains that the Old Testament contains a warrant for "indiscriminate massacre." Other critics of Christianity have leveled similar charges, accusing Yahweh of "crimes against humanity."

Some like the Early Church leader, later proclaimed a heretic, Marcion of Sinope, could not reconcile the differences. He believed and preached that the deity represented in the Old Testament was not the God and Father of Jesus Christ. For him, Yahweh of the Old Testament did not have the same purpose as God the Father and Jesus Christ.

John Wesley questioned the violence in the Old Testament, "Some scripture is not fit for Christian lips." Later he says, "To attribute such atrocities to God is an outrage against his character and makes him "more false, more cruel, and more unjust than the devil..."

There are passages of Scripture that cause you and I to squirm a bit in our seats. Throughout Leviticus the death penalty is called for those who engage in homosexuality, adultery, practice witchcraft, curse their father or mother, sleep around, blaspheme...not to mention the rest of the Pentateuch where God seems to demand the death of those who fail to listen to their spiritual leaders, those who worship another god, those who are not virgins on their wedding night, and those who work on the Sabbath.

Not to mention other places where God seems to, at the very least, condone violence:

God kills the firstborn children of every Egyptian.

Samson prays for a last bit of strength to destroy the temple and kill everyone inside.

In 2 Kings 2:23-24, the prophet Elisha calls out bears to eat a couple of rowdy boys who are making fun of his bald spot.

We could go on and on with passages throughout the Old Testament that make us uncomfortable.

These passages make us uncomfortable because we start with some theological foundations that are completely biblical.

### **Theological Foundations**

For us as Christians, we have two theological issues that stand front and central for us. First, we believe that God is good, and, connected to this, God is love.

In Psalm 136:1, the Psalm just prior to Psalm 137 where the Psalmist prays about dashing the babies on the rocks, it says,

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.  
His love endures forever.

1 John 4:8,

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

God being good, God being love are foundational to our faith...and when we read texts about God ordering or seemingly condoning murder and violence it is troubling.

Second, we believe that Jesus represents God perfectly. Last week we talked about Hebrews 1:3

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

This Jesus, who perfectly represents God, says things like: Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, those who live by the sword die by the sword...and then rather than resist, fight back, or allow his disciples to take up arms in his defense...He is beaten and dies on the cross.

This is does not seem compatible with some of the stories in the Old Testament. And yet, we are also committed to the Old Testament as part of our Scripture.

Often what happens is we just ignore or rush past these passages of Scripture. We don't allow ourselves to think about it, because we just aren't sure how to deal with them.

So we resort to a few common explanations:

- God doesn't fit into our categories of good and bad
- Everything God does is good, even if we don't understand it
- The Bible is inerrant with everything it says, so what it says we have to accept at face value
- This was just God meeting people where they were at in this time

While these help us, in some way, keep reading and keep following, they also allow us to dodge our responsibility to wrestle with this issue...

So here are a few ways that I have wrestled with this issue:

### **This is punishment for sin.**

When I was a kid my mom used one of those parentisms that we all have come to hate...and then use ourselves...She would be getting the belt or paddle and say, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you!"

My thought was, "Why don't you just whip yourself since you are already in pain?"

We realize, years later, there is some truth to that. We struggle to discipline our children because it hurts them, but we do it because we want them to be better people in the long run.

Our sins has consequences, and sometimes God brings punishment for our sin. And we forget how often God holds his punishment in the hope that people will repent and turn from their sins.

In Genesis 15:13-16, God is leading Abraham through the area of Canaan, and says, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, **for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.**"

The Canaanites were a brutal, warring group that indulged in all kinds of horrific behavior. They were known for deviant sexuality, drunkenness, murder, rape, and child sacrifice. They regularly attacked and brutally killed their neighbors. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities are destroyed because there was not a single righteous person to be found inside its walls.

Years later the Israelites will be judged and carried off to Babylon because they fail to live obediently to God...but only after years and years and years of God pleading with them to repent and turn back to him.

Sometimes, the texts we see as violent in Scripture, remind us that our sins have consequences. Some people, some cultures, are so violent and evil that many feel blessed by God if they stop it by any mean necessary.

We have to be careful with this line of reasoning, but there are times when God steps in to put an end to the evil people are inflicting on others. It is not our place to assume the role of God and decide when that time is, and we have to be extremely careful... because there have been times in our history when leaders, driven by their own selfish gain, have used this to cover up their own evil.

Another way of dealing with this is

**This is the cultural reality.**

The Bible is a brutally honest book. We live in a fallen world that does not function as God intended. And in the midst of this, God uses sinful men and women to do His will.

Habakkuk 1:5-7

“Look at the nations and watch—  
and be utterly amazed.  
For I am going to do something in your days  
that you would not believe,  
even if you were told.  
I am raising up the Babylonians,  
that ruthless and impetuous people,  
who sweep across the whole earth  
to seize dwellings not their own.  
They are a feared and dreaded people;  
they are a law to themselves  
and promote their own honor.

God tells Habakkuk He is going to use the Babylonians, an empire more sinful than Judah, to punish Judah. Habakkuk, I think rightly, questions God about this. God’s response in Habakkuk 2 is that while the Babylonians are instruments of judgment, they too will be judged for the methods they use and the sinfulness they inflict on other.

The reality of the land where Israel was headed was a violent land with warring tribes battling for existence. In order to exist as a people, they would have to fight for existence. They would need to defend themselves.

Peter Craigie, a scholar on violence in the Hebrew Bible says, “it is evident that without the use of force the state of Israel would not have come into existence.”

Just as it wouldn't excuse the Babylonians of their sinfulness, Israel would be judged for how they acted in the midst of this world.

I am reminded there are aspects of this culture that we take for granted that one day, people will look back on and consider us sinful for having participated in. We look back at those who practiced slavery and wonder how they missed the sinfulness of that? At the time, they didn't see it. It was a "natural" part of their culture. I am constantly plagued by the question, what parts of my current culture will someday be regarded as sin...and am I condoning something simply because it is a natural part of my culture?

The most helpful for me has been the realization that

### **The Old Testament is not a Christian document.**

Before you get think I'm dismissing it, I'm not. It is just a recognition that the Old Testament is first and foremost a record of how God started with one man, Abraham, and developed a nation in order to lead up Jesus Christ. It is a document that shows growth in how human beings understood and communicated with God. God, leading and growing and challenging people to take that next step.

John Bright, a brilliant Old Testament scholar, reminds us, "The Old testament is a document of the faith of the old Israel and only secondarily a document of the church. It's message is not of itself a Christian message."

Walter Breuggemann says, "Old Testament theological articulation does not conform to established church faith...There is much that is wild and untamed about the theological witness of the Old Testament that church theology does not face."

We know this, but it sounds strange to say it out loud. The Old Testament is a document that leads up to and puts in context the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. But it is a record of a faith absent the true Word of God in Jesus Christ.

A few months ago, I was wrestling with this once again, and found a short passage that really helped. It was the realization that Jesus took the Old Testament seriously, found God in it, but himself rejected that everything in it was a directive from God...even passages written as though God had said them.

C.S. Cowles says,

While Jesus affirmed the Hebrew Scriptures as the authentic Word of God, he did not endorse every word in them as God's. He rejected some Torah texts as representing the original will of God, such as Moses' divorce laws (Mark 10:4-9). He displaced Moses' laws governing vengeance with his new ethic of active nonviolent resistance of 'overcoming evil with good). His command to 'love your enemies' represents a total repudiation of Moses' genocidal commands and stands in judgment on Joshua's campaign of ethnic cleansing. In his word of absolution to the woman taken in adultery, Jesus contravened the clear injunctions of the Torah calling for adulterers to

be put to death. It is clear that Jesus exercised audacious prophetic authority over the Torah and on how it was to be interpreted.

Jesus took some passages of Scripture that were written as though God had said them, and proclaimed they were written by humans and did not represent the ultimate will of God. You and I are not Jesus and must be careful, but this certainly reminds us that we are to read the Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever put on a pair of those yellow sunglasses? They give everything this weird glow and everything looks yellow. Even a regular pair of sunglasses will cause everything to take on a certain shade.

When you and I read Scripture, we should have on a pair of Jesus glasses. Jesus Christ is the lens through which we read, interpret, and understand Scripture. So, when I come to a passage in the Old Testament that doesn't ring true with Jesus, I wrestle with it, pray about it, study and read, and then allow Jesus to be the final voice.

### **Conclusion**

Our world is filled with unspeakable violence and evil. Just this week, a young man walked into a church and shot and killed 9 people simply because of their race. It has become an almost daily occurrence for someone to blow themselves up in the name of God.

Within the past few years, there have been hundreds of pastors and churches claiming to speak and work in the name of God. Westboro Baptist, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell...and the Old Testament reminds us that many people will claim to do things on behalf of God but are serving their own self-interests.

In dealing with questions like this I have found that one single question helps remind and align my question: What about Jesus?

If I want to know about the character of God, how God would act and respond in certain situations, how would God respond to enemies and those who want to hurt me, how would God respond to sinful people around him...I start with Jesus. I follow his lead and try to learn from and develop his character in my life...

When I read the Old Testament, I ask does this represent what I know about the character of Jesus Christ?