

## If God is Good

We are trying to understand, in a deeply personal way, what God is like and from that understanding to grow in the way we think about and respond to Him. So far we have looked at three things that we find very positive, affirming and hopeful: God as gracious, God as love and God as our Father. In the Scriptures that we have read and in the examples we have looked at, we find a God who understands us, who has compassion for us, who has paid the price for us to be free from guilt and shame, who has loved us with an everlasting love.

But what about the other aspects of God's character such as His justice and holiness and the righteous requirements of His law? What about the stories in the Scriptures of His judgments against people who defied Him or were enemies of His people? How do we reconcile the loving nature of God with some things that seem harsh in His dealings, especially in the Old Testament? Is God just way more complex than humans have the wisdom and perspective to understand? - Well, yes, but God makes it clear in His Word that He wants us to know Him and to draw close to Him and to recognize His voice and to walk in His ways. I don't think He wants us to treat Him like a total mystery, a remote and unknowable God - like the gods of other ancient religions. So we need to come to grips with who He is, in reality and totality, and as best we can, recognizing that there will be limits to our knowledge.

I think this issue of God's goodness and whether or not He can be called a "loving God" impacts how we tell others about our experience as followers of Jesus. But there's another issue that affects how we respond to Him, in prayer, in obedience, emotionally. That's the issue of our freedom to respond to Him and it divides believers because it's been allowed to become a "line in the sand" kind of issue. On one side of the line, the argument is that God gave humans the freedom to choose for Him or to choose against Him. He made us with that right and that responsibility. On the other side of the line is the view that God is absolutely sovereign and chooses, for us, some who will believe and many others who will not believe. This is sometimes called the "New Calvinism" or the "New Reformed" movement and it has incredible influence in the church today. I'll tell you right off that I consider it a very dangerous position, because it cannot help but change our understanding of God as being good and loving in everything He does. We'll get into the reasons for that and where the arguments lead us as we move through the various relevant passages of the Bible.

But first, we need to address the complaints and the fears of many who see the God of the Old Testament as a harsh, murderous, vindictive tyrant, rather than the God of love that we believe He is. Some of you, I'm sure, have asked this question more than once: If God is loving and kind, compassionate and full of grace, why do we read of Him commanding the destruction of entire nations, insisting that they be wiped out? Why is there no indication of mercy to the people of Canaan? Is it objective and true to say that God is good and God is loving, when we see so much bloody violence in the Old Testament?

Let's dig in and try to gain some perspective on what we read, especially in the stories of Joshua leading the Israelite campaign to take the land of Canaan as a possession for Israel.

Point #1: The Old Testament writers who were in charge of preserving the history of God's people, didn't think that God wasn't good or loving. They portrayed Him as a wounded lover, a good God who was continually carrying the pain of being rejected by the people He had loved and cared for. Let me read a passage from Lamentations, the book that contains Jeremiah's lament over the sorrows of Jerusalem after Babylon had overrun the city:

*The unfailing love of the LORD never ends. By His mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. Great is His faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each day ... The LORD is wonderfully good to those who wait for Him and seek Him ...*

*For the Lord does not abandon anyone forever. Though He brings grief, He also shows compassion according to the greatness of His unfailing love. For He does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow. (3:22f, 25, 31ff)*

And from there Jeremiah goes on to describe how the leaders of God's people have denied their own people their rights and perverted justice. In other words, he says that the people of Jerusalem had sinned and that they deserved to suffer for their sin, but, at the same time, they experienced God's mercy.

You can read expressions about God's faithful love in the Psalms, in the books of Moses, in the prophets, and in the historical writings. These were the people who were witnessing the unfolding of Israel's history and they declared that God is good and loving and compassionate and forgiving.

Point #2: The Canaanites cannot be described as peace-loving people who were basically good and kind, but somehow got on God's bad side. Let's go back in history a bit. Abraham arrived in the land of Canaan in Genesis 12. The verses I'm about to read come only three chapters later. God had just renewed His promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and Abraham had asked the question, "How can I be sure that You will give it to me?"

*That evening, as the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep. He saw a terrifying vision of darkness and horror. Then the LORD told Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land and they will be oppressed as slaves for four hundred years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth ... Your descendants will return here to this land, when the sin of the Amorites has run its course. (Gen. 15:12-14, 16)*

The Amorites were from Babylon. Abraham was from Ur of Chaldea and the Babylonians ruled his home town. God brought him away from there, but they also moved westward, conquering, destroying, plundering the nations, and they arrived in Canaan and would possess it too. And here God tells Abraham that these Amorites,

called Canaanites, will be displaced from God's land and Abraham's descendants will take that place from them.

What is the sin of the Amorites? One writer suggests that it is the violent empire-building that spread west from Babylon. Leviticus 18 suggests other reasons:

*Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the people I am expelling from the Promised Land have defiled themselves. As a result, the entire land has become defiled. That is why I am punishing the people who live there and the land will soon vomit them out. (Lev. 18:24,25)*

These invaders from Babylon have so defiled the land that God was promising to Abraham that the land itself was sick of them, so sick that it would vomit them out.

This was also a people whose worship was so disgusting that God spoke through the writers of the Old Testament to warn against these abominations:

*"The people of Judah have sinned before My very eyes," says the LORD. "They have set up their abominable idols right in My own Temple, defiling it. They have built the pagan shrines of Topheth in the valley of the son of Hinnom, where they sacrifice their little sons and daughters in the fire. I have never commanded such a horrible deed; it never even crossed My mind to command such a thing!"*  
(Jer. 7:30f)

You can't miss God's outrage. This kind of action is what is defiling His beautiful creation, distorting the purpose for creation. It is vile and, worse, it is now being done by God's own people, the people of Judah who should know better than to imitate the false practices of the Canaanite cultures. To sum up this second point, then: God promises that the descendants of Abraham will live as slaves in exile for four hundred years until the sin of the Amorites runs its course, and then He will bring them back to their land. In the meantime, they suffer - in horrible conditions - for hundreds of years. God is incredibly patient with an incredibly corrupt and gross society and His own people have to pay a price for His patience.

Point #3: The writers of the Old Testament accounts of Israel's invasion of Canaan wrote in the style of the ancients. They used language that ancient writers describing battles would use. They were not writing for the New York Times or for some network news program and so they didn't submit to the conventions that we expect to be used in modern history-telling. Let me illustrate:

Egypt claimed in a great battle of the 15th century that they "annihilated totally" the great opposing army of Mittani, exterminating them fully to make them "like those not existent". In actuality, however, the great army of Mittani continued to fight on and cause Egypt trouble for more than a hundred years to come.

The Hittites claimed in a great battle of the thirteenth century B.C. to have "emptied the mountains of humanity" and made its people extinct, when in actuality, they simply won sovereignty over the Mt. Asharpaya and

Tarikarimu mountains. The people of the mountains lived on; this was simply military rhetoric for saying they had won a victory.

The Moabites beat Israel in battle in the eighth century and made the outrageous genocidal claim that, as a nation, “Israel has utterly perished for always.” In actuality, however, Israel lived on as a sovereign nation for a long time after that - just another way of saying, “We won!”

The Old Testament doesn't use this kind of trash-talking language very often, but, when it does, it is very clear that it is using it in the same way as these examples demonstrate. For example, Joshua 9-12 describes the attack of 31 kings from northern and southern Canaan who band together with the goal of wiping Israel off the map. Facing genocidal extinction in the face of far superior numbers, Israel defeats the kings of Canaan and declares that they have destroyed all the Canaanites and captured all the land, but, as you read on, you quickly realize that this is not literally true - that Joshua still has many battles to fight and there are still kings of those same cities that have to be defeated. This style of writing has been described by respected Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright:

*We must also recognize that the language of warfare had a conventional rhetoric that liked to make absolute and universal claims about total victory and completely wiping out the enemy. Such rhetoric often exceeded reality on the ground . . . This is not to accuse the biblical writers of falsehood, but to recognize the literary conventions of writing about warfare.*

Point #4: In modern times, cities are populated by a diverse mixture of people: families with children, the elderly, the workers and students. In ancient times, what were called cities were often simply military outposts. Most people lived in villages, places where they could grow crops and raise livestock, not behind high city walls where space was at a premium. So, a city like Jericho, for example, was only six acres with a maximum capacity for 1200 soldiers. Richard Hess, an Old Testament scholar, has persuasively argued that Jericho and Ai, the first two cities attacked by Israel in the book of Joshua, probably held less than 200 soldiers each. Another scholar, Paul Copan writes:

*All the archaeological evidence indicates that no civilian populations existed at Jericho, Ai and other cities mentioned in Joshua ... Jericho was a small settlement of probably 100 or fewer soldiers. This is why all of Israel could circle it seven times and then do battle against it on the same day. (Copan, Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God, Baker Books, 2011, p. 176)*

When a foreign army approached, they would need to attack these military outposts, but any civilians present would know they were coming and would make sure they got out of there long before a battle took place. The conquering of the cities of Canaan described in Joshua is largely the conquering of military outposts.

Point #5: We may have a misunderstanding of some of the terminology used in Joshua. For example, the word “kings” is used to describe local military leaders. And the word “thousand”, when used in a military context, can also be translated “squad” or “unit”.

So when 12,000 are defeated at Ai in Joshua 8:25, Old Testament scholars note that the more likely translation is 12 units or squads, each of which would have consisted of about 10 soldiers. So, when a “king” is defeated and the “city” he was guarding is emptied out, it simply means that the military base of this Canaanite general has been overrun and occupied by the Israelite army. The numbers that seem to imply massive slaughter may not be anything like the numbers on the day of battle and are unlikely to involve any civilians at all. If you are wondering, “What about Rahab?”, think about a military outpost that would have occasional visitors and needed a person to run the hostel/tavern where they stayed. Scholars think it likely that Rahab and her family ran the hostel and tavern where foreign visitors would stay and that’s why, when a report came to the “king” of Jericho that foreign spies had been seen, he went to Rahab to ask her to turn them over.

Another phrase that was used frequently in ancient times to describe total victory in battle is the phrase “all men and women, young and old”. The picture is the slaughter of the elderly, the women and the children - except that it’s not. When the phrase is used in Joshua it is describing the destruction of the local militia, the capturing of a fortress where no women or children or elderly would even be present. This phrase is used to indicate total victory, complete overcoming of the enemy, a captured city, or fortress, and the destruction of the opposing forces. An example is found in 1 Samuel 15 where Saul is told by God to completely destroy the Amalekites - men, women, children, cattle, sheep, everything. And Saul claims to have done so with the exception of King Agag and the best of the flocks and herds. When Samuel comes to confront Saul, he doesn’t say anything about women and children, but rebukes him for sparing King Agag and the animals. Despite this language, who is the enemy of the Jews in the Book of Esther, maybe 600 years later? None other than Haman the Agagite, an Amalekite.

Point #6: The language that is used in the book of Joshua is primarily “driving out” rather than “killing off”. Israel took the land away from the Canaanites gradually, became stronger and stronger over time, faced many threats from outside and from within, and survived in the land for hundreds of years. Those who had lived there previously were forced to find a home elsewhere, or, as many did, to work as slaves to the new landlords.

The phrase that is used for “driving out” is the same phrase that was used in describing God removing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Because of their sin and because God mercifully did not want them to eat of the tree of life and live forever in their broken state, He “drove them out” and they moved east, towards what would eventually become Babylon.

Point #7: In many parts of Scripture we see Israel facing another “How long O LORD?” situation. That was certainly the case when they were enslaved in Egypt and it was at that very time when God was patiently waiting before bringing justice to bear on the evil that the Amorites in Canaan were committing. You often hear people rail against injustice and ask why God doesn’t do more to bring evil actions to account. But then,

when He does, those same people recoil in horror and become angry with the God who has acted to bring justice. The degree of violence, of sexual perversion and the slaughter of infants needed a response and yet God waited for hundreds of years before responding through the Israelite invasion. If anything, you might question the suffering of Israel under the Egyptians and why that had to be sustained for so long - but God was working in their suffering and was patient with the Amorites. If we think we understand how God should deal with evil, we're pretty arrogant and certainly lack both His mercy and His patience.

Point #8: The Israelites were the little guy going up against the powerfully equipped armies of Canaan. The Israelites didn't have iron chariots or the ability to forge weapons that had been developed in the land they were going to. They had numbers, but not the armaments, and that was a big drawback - witness the response of ten of the twelve spies who were too afraid to enter the land which had fortified cities and giant warriors. If God had not been with them, they would have been wiped out quickly by the superior armies of the Canaanites.

#### Applications:

1. When you read quotes like the famous Richard Dawkins quote trashing the God of the Old Testament, "the most unpleasant character in all fiction", please understand that he is way out of his depth on this. He's not interested in being a scholar who understands the subtleties of language that were common in the day or the evil of the Canaanites that was being judged - he has his own anti-God agenda and he's arguing for it.
2. When the writers of the Old Testament declared the goodness of God, they didn't have their heads in the sand, pretending something they didn't really believe in their hearts. They were expressing what they knew to be true and had experienced personally. What that tells us is that we can be sure that God revealed His goodness even while He was judging the evil of the nations, and we can trust that we can - and we do - know His goodness. Remind yourself of how He has shown you kindness and compassion and love.
3. Never underestimate the patience of God. He will judge the evil in this world - He's promised to do that - but He gives rebellious humans every opportunity to repent, to turn to Him, to stand for righteousness, to live well. He is giving people in our generation the opportunity to turn from their pursuit of proud and selfish ends ... He's waiting - patiently - and offering forgiveness and healing and hope to our generation. It won't go on forever, but His mercies are new every morning.