

## Skeptical: “Doesn’t the Bible condone genocide and atrocities?”, 6/23/19

Now if you just happened to visit our church today, hoping for an uplifting, encouraging sermon... I am going to disappoint you, at least at first...we will land there but I do think this is a critical issue, because it’s questions like this and that can cause some to question their faith and God’s goodness.

Atheist Richard Dawkins in *God Delusion* says, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; racist, infanticidal, genocidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

Wow, tell us how you really feel. How does Dawkins come up with this grotesque portrait of God? Isn’t God quite the opposite, loving and gentle and gracious?

Deuteronomy 20:16-17

*In the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you.*

1 Samuel 15:3

*Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.*

Here in the Old Testament are two of a handful of passages where God commanded the Israelite army to utterly destroy certain Canaanite cities in the promised Land, the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants. Maybe some of us are just now finding out that the Bible has these kinds of stories in it. Pretty uncomfortable, maybe shocking, isn’t it? We hear commands like this from God, and we wonder what possible place they can have in a book that tells us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies. These passages not only describe, but mandate what appears to be genocide. When genocide takes place in our modern world, like the during Holocaust or just 25 years ago when in 100 days in Rwanda the Hutu tribe slaughtered 800,000 men, women and children of the Tutsi tribe...we are collectively horrified and the UN in many cases has war crime tribunals.

Is God a genocidal, malevolent bully...especially in the Old Testament?

### Three Responses to “Genocide” in the Bible

#### 1) God brings judgment upon a generationally wicked culture.

Deuteronomy 9:4

*Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, “it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,” whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you.*

### Deuteronomy 18:9-12

*<sup>9</sup> When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. <sup>10</sup> Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, <sup>11</sup> or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. <sup>12</sup> Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.*

For a couple thousand years, generation after generation, the Canaanite culture became more and more entrenched in deeply disturbing and evil practices in the name of their gods like a few that we just heard in Deuteronomy. As I was reading about what we have found in archaeology, the detailed practices of child sacrifice and the sex cults...it actually made me sick to my stomach and I had to stop. I will spare you the details...but it was far worse than any horror movie.

Leviticus 18:24-25 tells us that the wickedness of this culture dwelling in the promised land at that time was so vile that the **land itself became so defiled that is vomiting out its inhabitants**. If you have ever had food poisoning then you know the joy of spending an evening on the bathroom floor, hugging the toilet bowl? Why does our body react that way? When there is a harmful, poison in our body, our body's natural reaction is to expel it until it's gone. God built our bodies this way, biologically. In Leviticus, God is personifying the land in the same way. The toxicity level, the spiritual poison was so bad, that it had to be vomited out...the command for most of the Canaanite land was the drive them out, and spare those who surrender, absorb the women and children into your nation, but in a few extreme cases, certain cities God commanded a "scorched earth" policy...destroy everything and never inhabit them again. I've never visited the **Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz**. It remains uninhabited, they never tore it down and built a Mall there...Why? Billy Graham, "Auschwitz stands as a tragic reminder of the terrible potential man has for violence and inhumanity." You have to pause and take in the darkness that can dwell in man. It seems these Canaanite cities had to stay uninhabited and barren for the same reason.

### **2) God desired to stop the spiritual poison from spreading to the Israelites and Nations.**

If you watched season 2 of **Stranger Things**, we learn that the evil world of the "upside down" begins to creep into our dimension and spreads underground. This is first revealed because an **entire pumpkin patch turns rotten**. So they realize somehow they have to stop the spread at its source. Don't worry, I haven't ruined it for you if you haven't seen it.

In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, when God commands the Israelites to wipe out everyone in the cities of the Canaanites, the reason He gives is that, **"Otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God"**. The spiritual blob/upside down will spread. The religious purity of Israel was not only important for their own sake, but because of God's intention that they would function as a witness to His power, love, justice and goodness to other nations as it says in Genesis 18. This is why it was so vital to God that Israel start off their life in the promised land without this dark

evil present. Tragically, because of the failure of the Israelites to obey God's command they were influenced to follow the false religions of the Canaanites over the centuries to follow.

### **3) God was exceedingly patient with the Canaanites.**

This command was not spur of the moment. It was not capricious, meanness. In Genesis 15:13-16, God visits Abraham in a deep sleep and tells him that his descendants will be enslaved for 4 generations in Egypt before they get to the promised land, the land of the Canaanites. The reason for the delay is because, *"Their sin has not yet reached its full measure."* 400 years, God was patient, if anything, maybe the question we should be asking is, Why did God wait so long to judge?

The Canaanites had opportunity after opportunity to repent and turn from their wickedness and turn to the true God, whose wonderful works, power and blessing they had witnessed all around them for centuries. And the Canaanites knew the Israelite army was coming. They had ample opportunity to flee or repent, there was no command from God to pursue the Canaanites, and presumably many of them did flee, only the ones who refused and wanted war against God and his people would stay. We have one redeeming story, Rahab the Canaanite prostitute in Joshua 2 who repents and believes in God. God's mercy and compassion was evidenced in that she becomes an ancestor of King David and is in the lineage of Jesus Christ!

This same patience was displayed in God's judgment of the earth in thousands of years before in the flood. *Genesis 6:5 The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*

It is this kind of ongoing, generational, systemic and toxic evil when God says, enough. But in God's grace he spared Noah's family...For 120 years, God was patient, giving them opportunity to repent, but when the ark was finished and the rains came, God's patience was up and his judgment came. In the book of Jonah, one such wicked city, Nineveh, did repent and God did not bring the destruction he promised because he had compassion upon them. This is consistent with the God of the NT. He is the same today with us.

#### **2 Peter 3:9**

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

**Next Slide** I think it is also important to understand that judgment upon this generationally wicked people is not racism. This is not genocide because God didn't like the color of their skin or simply because they were not Jewish. There are dozens of texts about how Israel was to be a blessing to the nations, invite them to worship God and be hospitable to the foreigner. This was a one-time, unique declaration of judgment specifically upon these Canaanite cities.

#### **What about the innocent Canaanite children?**

This is a troubling thought isn't it? We aren't told the answers and God's ways are not always readily understandable to our minds. But one thought, the Bible tells us in **Hebrews 9:27 "It is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment."** Did God spare these children from eternal consequences, knowing they would have been brought up to continue the evil of their parents and grandparents, and great grandparents? We are on dangerous ground though with thoughts like this...because only God can determine judgment, we do not arbitrate who should live. We need to rest on God's character to judge justly.

### **Why did God use the Israelites as his agents of annihilation?**

In the cases of the Flood for example, God acted directly...but it is troubling that God would use people to kill men, women and children. Perhaps God wanted to use the Israelites in this way so that they would learn the seriousness of sin and the reality of God's judgment. These truths would be burned deeply on their consciousness as they remembered the annihilation they had been involved in. There is a season in history where God is king over the people of Israel, nationally and politically, and uses this people as an instrument to accomplish his ways in the world- both peace, prosperity, blessing AND Judgment. A major component of this was preparing the world for the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to come through the Jewish line. Important to note, that the church today is not a national or political entity. We are under a new covenant. Why? What changed? Everything! On the cross, **Jesus is used as an instrument of judgment on sin...he who knew no sin became sin... AND an instrument of the love and mercy of God for humanity.** We are in a spiritual war with a spiritual enemy, not a physical war, Ephesians 6. Our role is not to be instruments of God's judgment but rather instruments of reconciliation!

### **2 Corinthians 5:20**

*We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

Now for some of us, none of what I say vindicates God. **Because the very idea of a judging God is offensive.** We want God to be only loving, only forgiving... and listen I personally struggle with this too. But why aren't we equally offended by the idea of a God who forgives horrific sin, and all sin in the sight of God is a horrific offense against him? See, we need to understand just how much our perspective is influenced by our modern, western sensibilities. Many cultures around the world and throughout history have no issue with God's judgment but have a problem with his mercy and forgiveness. So realize just how ethnocentric we are being when we judge God's eternal character based on the last 50 years in America and our western sensibilities.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian professor at Yale Divinity School, was an eyewitness to the ruthless violence in the Balkans in the hands of atheist Communists says this.

**"If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence- that God would not be worthy of worship. The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is... the belief in divine vengeance."**

How do you say to someone or a people group who has been abused, violated, slaughtered, oppressed, such western pleasantries like- “Violence doesn’t solve problems.” “Don’t take justice into your own hands.” None of that helps from retaliation and vengeance...as Volf says, these pleasantries detached from a just God “secretly nourishes violence.” Instead, the only belief that will sustain is, “There is a judge and it’s not you.” Unless that’s at the bottom of your heart you will not be able to live in non-retaliation when you experience real injustice.

Maybe some of this helps to bring clarity to God’s justice and the seriousness of sin in the abstract...but Jesus isn’t just knocking on our heads, he is always knocking on our hearts to say... what about you today?

### Luke 7:36-50

<sup>36</sup> When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. <sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. <sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.” <sup>40</sup> Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. <sup>41</sup> “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” <sup>43</sup> Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. <sup>44</sup> Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” <sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” <sup>49</sup> The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” <sup>50</sup> Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

This story is here for one reason, so that we would ask ourselves: do we see ourselves as those who really need God’s forgiveness, or are we self-righteous like the pharisee? We all have sinned. All the seeds of every vile sin of the Canaanites is in our hearts. We are alienated from God and he has every right to destroy us and yet he’s patient with us, he pursues us with his love, he gives us his grace. We will never fully understand the Gospel unless we understand this. **Those who understand the weight of sin are overwhelmed by the grace of what Jesus has done for us.** Those forgiven much, love much.