

How Are God's Actions in the Old Testament Loving?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | October 2, 2009



I was asked how can our GOD be loving when, throughout the bible we see numerous examples of Him killing and displacing the innocent? For example in Joshua 6: 2 He took land from the people of Jericho and gave it to Israel by force

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“And the LORD said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour.”

Then in Joshua 6: 21

“And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.”

He sanctioned the killing of the young and the old including animals, how is this Love?

How can the descendants or relatives of the people in Jericho be convinced that the God of Israel

who killed their fore parents or family member and who had nothing to do with Israel's displacement, be a GOD of Love, is Holy and should be worshiped? How do I explain this to a Buddhist for example, who does not believe in our GOD, that our GOD is kind, loving and good?

BK

I have had a question come up several times from others that I was talking with about your SS class. I totally appreciate your class and attend when I am in Collegedale. The question comes in talking about God not slaying the wicked and of course they think He does. They bring up the Old Testament and the many times that God told the children of Israel to go in and slay everyone, men, women and children. At the flood God says that 'their thought were to do evil continually' and He brought the flood.

My thoughts on this was that here we are talking about two different things. The first death and the final separation from the presence of God. We all will sleep the first death unless God comes first but was God just letting them sleep until the end?

I would appreciate your thoughts here.

WT

BK and WT thanks for your questions.

You have both raised an issue which has caused great confusion to many honest people throughout the centuries. How can a God of love act in ways that appear to be unloving? Many have tried to answer this question by splitting God's character into something other than love, such as, "God is not only loving, He is also just." Such people go on to explain God's justice as the imposition of punishment when love and mercy, at some point, stop working to save the sinner.

But such ideas misunderstand the inspired record and occur from those who don't fully appreciate God's divine character. The Bible is clear that God IS love. There is no other Biblical definition for the character of God. Every ability of God, every action by God, every attribute of God is an expression of His character of love.

So, how do we understand love in the OT stories? In order to understand we must step back and see the history of the world from, as far as possible, God's perspective. Then His actions come into focus as completely loving.

God created the world to operate upon perfect love. Harmony with the law of love is the basis for life. Deviations from this principle result in pain, suffering, and death. Once Adam and Eve transgressed (breeched love,) their condition became terminal and without divine intervention the only outcome was death.

Imagine Adam and Eve infected themselves with HIV. They would be terminal and all their children, born with HIV inherited from their parents, would also be terminal. Without some outside intervention

they are destined to die. All mankind is in this situation because of sin. We are born in sin and conceived in iniquity (Ps 51:5).

God realized that mankind, after Adam's fall, was dying, that no human being would survive unless God Himself intervened and provided a remedy to this condition. Jesus Christ is that remedy. Therefore, in order for God to save any human being, Jesus had to come to planet earth and complete His mission. Without Jesus all humanity would be lost – eternally lost.

Therefore, in the OT we find God working out the plan of salvation which requires Christ to come to earth. Satan worked to prevent this and sought to win over all humanity so that there would not be one human on earth through whom God could work for the Messiah to come. If Satan succeeded in this regard then all humanity would have been lost. At one point in human history there was only one righteous man (Noah) left on the earth. The avenue for the Savior was almost shut. Therefore, God acted, in love, to put the antediluvian population into the grave in order to keep open the avenue for the Messiah.

But we must remember that all those who have gone into the grave will come out again, either in the resurrection of life or the resurrection of damnation (John 5:29). When each person arises they continue their life in accordance with the kind of person they were when they went into the grave. Those who were in a saving relationship with God rise to spend eternity with Him, but those who opposed God rise to join Satan in continued warfare against God culminating in their eternal loss. Thus, going into the grave in the OT does not determine the eternal destiny of each person. Each person's eternal destiny is determined by their own ongoing choice to oppose God and their hostile response to truth and grace.

Regarding the stories of God helping the children of Israel kill people we must first remember that putting people to rest in the grave was not God's original plan. God's plan was as follows:

"I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. 28 I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. 29 But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. 30 Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land. Exodus 23:27-30

God's way would have had the occupants of Canaan remove themselves from the land, abandoning their homes, and the Hebrews would slowly occupy the land without warfare. But, because of the hardness of human hearts and because of Satan's efforts to get nations around to destroy Israel, human warfare ensued. Therefore, God acted to help Israel prevail in many circumstances, but for what purpose? For at least two reasons, first to keep open the channel for the Messiah to come, for without the Messiah all humanity would be eternally lost. And, second to reduce human pain and suffering!

God is not confined to time and space as we mere mortals are. To Him past, present, and future are all equally laid out before Him. Given the hardness of human hearts, given the ability of Satan to stir up God's enemies to attack His people, God knew that millennia of war, conflict, and terrorism would ensue. Therefore, in order to minimize human pain and suffering He instructed the Israelites to kill all the people in certain areas so that there would not be generations of blood feuds, tribal warfare, and ethnic violence. But, as history confirms Israel failed to follow God's guidance and instead the world has suffered millennia of conflict in this region. Had the Israelites followed God's instructions the pain, suffering, and loss of human life would have been markedly reduced.

Regarding the destruction of the animals, God did not want the children of Israel to become mercenaries and think of warfare as a means of enriching self or prospering the nation. God did not want them to consider that God needed war in order for God to provide for their needs. Therefore, God instructed them to kill all of the livestock, which was a valuable commodity in ancient times. It is also possible that the livestock may have carried diseases and God wanted to protect the people and their livestock from such infection.

Finally, we must also remember that what happened in the OT was not “punishment” for sin. The Bible makes it clear that the “punishment” for unremedied sin is eternal death, not suffering, not banishment, not torture, not starvation, not sleeping in the grave until resurrection. Further, even using the logic of those who believe God does inflict punishment for sin, God does not inflict punishment before judgment. The judgment is yet future. Thus no one has received “divine punishment” for sin. God’s actions in the OT were not to punish sin, they were to save, heal, and protect. Therefore, when we step back and understand the issues from a larger view we see God, lovingly, patiently, graciously acting to redeem fallen man, even taking risks of being misunderstood in order to do what is right.