

April 30, 2023

“But What about Holy War?”  
Judges 1:1-26

FCF: Obstacles to faith

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) The LORD wants us to come with our questions.  
(magnet) and follow where they lead.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

“Faith,” in the biblical sense, is not a blind leap but an informed step, based on what you know. Case in point, you sat down in that chair because you knew it would hold you. You got in the passenger seat because you trusted the driver. You accept a job offer or a marriage proposal. That’s not a blind leap. It’s a step, based on what you know - not exhaustive but still sufficient.

That’s faith. That said, there can be obstacles to faith. What if you are impeded in your knowledge? What if you are confused, unsettled such that it makes it hard to go forward? That’s an obstacle to faith. We’re in a series in the book of Judges. Read a certain way, Judges can be an obstacle to faith. That is, the question of “holy war” can be an obstacle. So, in order to move forward in this study, we’re going to go backwards and talk about what we see right at the start.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Judges 1:1-10, 16-26](#)

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Questions come from all directions. Small children ask questions. Some are charming. Some embarrassing. We all ask questions, even big questions. That’s to be expected. Consider God’s greatness and our limits. Or just the confusion of our age that can turn you upside down.

We are always asking questions. And hearing them. Some questions we hear can take you back, especially as a person of faith when you hear questions of doubt. But such questions should never be put off or ignored. Nor should they be feared. As I have told my own children, “You may not know the answer to that question that’s plaguing you. But I can promise you that there is an answer and the Lord will guide you through it.” We ought not to fear the questions.

Which brings us to the topic of the “holy war”. Think about it. God had commanded Israel to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan. Here we have God’s people told to do something that would be condemned today as being akin to “ethnic cleansing.” What do we do with this? Ask the questions. The LORD wants us to come with our questions and follow where they lead.

Two points. First, the ways to answer the question. And second, where we go from here.

**I. WAYS TO ANSWER THE QUESTION**

First, the ways to answer the question. Those would be ways both unhelpful and helpful.

*A) Unhelpful Attempts*

We’ll start with a few unhelpful attempts at answering the question about “holy war.”

1. Israel misheard

Some say Israel misheard God’s command, hearing it in the context of the violent world of the ancient Near East. They misheard and misunderstood, filtering it through their cultural context.

2. God accommodated

Some will say that God accommodated His commands to the views of His people. That is, He was willing to get His hands dirty, to compromise Himself, so as to gradually move them along.

3. Rhetorical language

Some will say this is rhetorical language. It wasn't an extermination but an eviction. The reports of great numbers slain were just a way of saying, "We really took it to them and won the day."

4. Primitive religion

Some will say this is representative of primitive religion and an early stage in Israel's growth as a people. But the critique is a bit arbitrary. How would we be able to say this was wrong but by a standard against murder and theft? Oh wait. That's the Ten Commandments, the Old Testament as well. To say one thing is offensive while embracing the other is all subjective, a bit arbitrary.

*B) Better Answers*

Israel misheard. God accommodated. Rhetorical language. Primitive religion. Clearly, we need better answers than those. But to get at them, we need to start by taking a big step back.

1. God as the sovereign Creator

(**READ Genesis 1:1**) A fundamental biblical principle is that God is the sovereign Creator of all that there is. So He is the owner of all there is. He has the right to rule and move as He wills.

2. God as the just Judge

God is the sovereign Creator. He is also the just Judge. All people everywhere all through time are accountable to Him. We see this in both the Old and New Testament. It is fundamental.

3. Man as fallen

God is the sovereign Creator and the just Judge. And man? Mankind is fallen, rightly subject to God's judgment. So, strictly speaking, there is no "slaughter of the innocents" because there are no innocents. By the way, it's worth knowing of the crass, vile, despicable immorality at that time among the Canaanites - the institutionalized child sacrifice and sexual debauchery tied to their religious practices. These were not the folks you wanted as your next door neighbors.

4. The purpose of Israel

Which brings us to the purpose and calling of Israel, the reason for their existence. From the start, they had been blessed by God's grace to be a blessing for His glory - to not only point the way through their lives to the reality of the one true God but to be the vehicle through whom the Christ would come. Through this one people would eventually come the Savior of all peoples.

5. Their call to war

Which then brings us to the call to war. The call of Israel by God was tied to a place, having this land promised to them by God. If these other peoples, the Canaanites of the day, were allowed to remain in that land, they would drag Israel down into their idolatry, injustice, and evil. Which, in the end, is exactly what happened as events unfolded and as Israel continually compromised.

This was not ethnic cleansing. It was not based on race. The opportunity was always held forth for these peoples to repent and turn to the LORD. And some did. Nor was it a grab for land and a conquest. It was an act of judgment. It was a sign, a breaking in of the future into the present.

That is the background for the call to this “holy war,” shocking as it may seem to us.

*Application:*

Before we move to the next point, let me suggest just a couple of things for application. The first is that we must not rush to judgment when we are faced with such questions. We need to question our questions, doubt our doubts, and be willing to let our assumptions be challenged.

That’s the first thing, to not rush to judgment. The second is tied to it and that’s to listen with humility. Again, we need to consider who it is we are railing against, the One of whom we read earlier in Job. And we would do well to answer as Job did, with a quieted mind and spirit.

The LORD wants us to come with our questions, really come. And go where they lead.

## **II. WHERE WE GO FROM HERE**

Which brings us to the second point. With all that in mind, where do we go from here? What difference might considering the question of “holy war” make for our everyday lives?

### *A) God’s Eternal Nature*

Let me suggest two categories - God’s eternal nature and then God’s ongoing decree.

#### 1. The reality of His holiness

Consider the reality of God’s holiness we see revealed here. It’s hard to miss. Of course, we get stuck on the question, “How could God possibly condemn these people this way?” But the fact is that the question we should be asking is, “How could He possibly have mercy on any of us?”

#### 2. The wonder of His mercy

Which brings me to this. The “holy war” shows us both the reality of God’s holiness and the wonder of His mercy. “How so?” you ask. Think with me. It was merciful for Him to let the Canaanites live in this land as long as they did. It was merciful for Him to limit the application of these commands to the nations within the Promised Land. It was merciful for Him to protect Israel from idolatry. And it was merciful for Him to bring down His ultimate justice, the hell we deserved, upon Himself at the cross such that we could be free. Amazing love, how can it be?

### *B) God’s Ongoing Decree*

The “holy war” points us to God’s eternal nature. But then also to His ongoing decree.

#### 1. The battle

We are still in a war (**READ Ephesians 6:10-12**). Paul is very clear. The battle rages on.

#### 2. The enemy

We are still much engaged in a battle with an enemy - not human beings occupying a physical spaces but demonic forces, Satan himself, occupying a world that is not his own. Our King, the Lord Jesus, has sent us as an invading army. We are the Rebellion. We are the Resistance.

### 3. The weapons

And in this battle, there are still weapons to be wielded, weapons picked up and utilized to the full. They are not swords, clubs, or spears ([READ Ephesians 6:13-18a](#)). Those are our weapons.

These are things worth pondering - God's eternal nature and His ongoing call.

#### *Illustration:*

Let me come back to the call, the call to war. Do we even know there's a war on? I came across this piece by Scott Simon on NPR back in 2017. He was reflecting upon the brutal images coming out of Syria, the horror of chemical warfare ([READ "A Meditation on Evil"](#)):

I have always avoided using the word "evil" when covering terrible events, even those in Bosnia and Kosovo that would later be labeled war crimes. I was of a generation educated to believe that "evil" was a cartoonish moral concept, a word we used only when we didn't know what madness or imagined infraction might drive human beings to commit murder, even on a mass scale... I've interviewed Romeo Dallaire, the former Canadian general who commanded U.N. peacekeeping forces in Rwanda in 1993 and 1994. General Dallaire discovered Hutu soldiers were getting ready to massacre Tutsi civilians. But he was prevented by U.N. leadership from using his troops to try to stop the murders before they could take place. More than 800,000 Tutsi Rwandans were then slaughtered over three months.

Romeo Dallaire said that what happened made him believe in evil, and even a force he called the devil.

"I've negotiated with him," he told us, "shaken his hand. Yes. There is no doubt in my mind ... and the expression of evil to me is through the devil and the devil at work and possessing human beings and turning them into machines of destruction. ... And one of the evenings in my office, I was looking out the window and my senses felt that something was there with me that shifted me. I think that evil and good are playing themselves out and God is monitoring and looking at how we respond to it."

#### *Application:*

I am not "spiritualizing" here. The point is that evil, Satan, and this battle is real - as real as the one in the valleys of Canaan. As real as the blood on the ground and the bodies in the dirt. We need not question that. The question is if we are aware of the battle and engaged in the fight.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

As we wrap this up, let me go back to where we started and the obstacles to faith - to our own and to others. First, the obstacles to our own faith and how we ask our questions. We need to do that as honestly as we can. The reality is that what we want can have a powerful effect on what we believe. Let me give you a simple example. Tim Keller has noted the number of times he has sat down with a college student and the conversation goes something like this. They start saying how hard it is to believe Christianity anymore, giving all the stock reasons for skepticism. Keller listens patiently but then will finally ask, "So, tell me. Who do you want to sleep with?" Shocking as that may sound, that's often the issue. What we want can effect what we believe.

So there are the obstacles to our own faith and the need to honestly ask our questions. But then there are the obstacles to the faith of others and the need to listen as carefully as we can. To shut down the questions is to kill the growth. It can leave that person's faith hobbled, thinned out with shallow roots. So they will be unable to withstand the storms and saying, "If God isn't big enough for my questions, how can He be big enough for my pain? How real can He be?"

The LORD wants us to come with our questions. We need to know that for ourselves and to say it to one another - whether that's questions about Old Testament holy war or anything else that may come up. He wants us to come with our questions. And to follow wherever they lead.

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