

# WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BIBLE CONFIDENCE AND KNOWING THE STORY



## **Session 4:** **Freedom** **and** **Longing**

Understanding key themes: How are freedom and justice connected in the Bible?

Understanding key themes: How did the experience of being in exile shape the Bible story, and how does it shape us?

Tricky question: How might I understand the dark and violent pictures of God in the Bible?

# Understanding key themes: How are freedom and justice connected in the Bible?



For Christians, both the Exodus and the Passover meal help us to understand the eternal freedom more fully which we have in Christ.

Jesus talks about his “exodus” to Moses and Elijah in Luke 9, referring to his death and resurrection. He is called the “greater Moses”.

In 1 Corinthians 10 we read: “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...These things happened to them as examples...”

Early Christians understood that while the people of Israel were rescued from human oppression, this was an early version of how in Christ God had freed people from deeper kinds of slavery – freedom from sin, from the fact that they could not keep God’s law in their own strength, and the forces of death and evil.

This was most powerfully demonstrated at the last (Passover) supper, when Jesus took the broken bread and drank the wine.

“Freedom, oh freedom, is coming, oh yes I know!”

For many centuries and in many different struggles for justice people have been inspired by the story of God rescuing His people from slavery and oppression in Egypt and read the story of the Bible as one of God’s rescue.

The Exodus is a repeated theme of the Bible. There are at least 24 references to it in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In order to be truly free, God gave His people a way of *remembering* that they had been rescued – the Passover meal – and a way of *experiencing* their freedom – Sabbath.

## Passover and Remembering Freedom

The Exodus helped shaped ongoing understanding of who God called them to be and the Passover meal was the way God enabled them to pass on that identity:

“And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” (Exodus 12: 26-27)

Various symbols and foods are used to tell the story.

"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26)

Early Christians have seen this as Jesus saying, "The bread which reminded you of slavery in Egypt, is now my body. Before, when you drank the cup, it reminded you of your delivery from Egyptian bondage. Now it will remind you of your delivery from the bondage of sin and death. Do this in remembrance of Egypt but also now in remembrance of me."

Paul, who has been called the 'apostle of freedom', unpacks how in Christ, while Christians still experience some of the "slavery of sin", through the cross the issue has been settled for good - sin, death and evil have been ultimately defeated.

It is through the truth of Christ that the freedom that was originally intended for us can be restored. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

Through His Spirit Christians now have genuine freedom to choose a new way of life, and, as we are able to surrender to Him, the Spirit changes us from the inside out, bringing greater freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17)

In the same way that Jewish people are called to remember their freedom through the Passover, and live into that identity, our continuing remembering of the Last Supper through Holy Communion or Mass is to shape us as free people.



## Sabbath and Experiencing Freedom

We have already explored how the practice of Sabbath is essential to a balanced, free life. In order to experience their new freedom, God gave His people the sabbath. (Exodus 20: 8-11). It is the longest of the ten commandments, and as one writer puts it, is a rejection of slavery, then and now:

"There had been no Sabbath in Egypt, no work stoppage; no work stoppage for Pharaoh who worked day and night to stay atop the pyramid. There had been no work stoppage for the slaves, because they had to gather straw during their time off; no work stoppage of anybody in the Egyptian system, because frantic productivity drove the entire system. And now (God) nullifies that entire system of anxious production.

"There are limits to how much and how long slaves must produce bricks! The limit is set by the weekly work pause that breaks the production cycle. And those who participate in it break the anxiety cycle.

They are invited to awareness that life does not consist in frantic production and consumption that reduces everyone else to threat and competitor....You are in the image of the creator God who did not need to work to get ahead. Nor do you!" (Walter Brueggemann)





## Freedom and Justice



While contemporary culture may tend to understand freedom as the right to be who we want to be (expressive individualism) the story of the Bible offers a different vision.

For the Jewish people escaping from Egypt, the rescue was both from something, but also *for* something – the freedom to be God’s people in God’s land.

And, as *The Drama of Scripture* unpacks, this was so they could continue to be a blessing to the nations,

“The role of the priests within Israel is to mediate between God and the people. Thus, on an international scale, Israel is called to mediate between the Lord and all the nations.

Israel is to be a display people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people. As the Israelites obey God, they will demonstrate what life under God’s reign looks like.

The nations will be able to catch a glimpse of God’s plan for all peoples....It is to be such a full and rich human life that the nations of the Earth will be drawn to it.”

Similarly, for Christians, freedom in Christ includes, for example, the freedom to join in with God’s Spirit in the re-creation of the world, or the freedom to allow God to change our characters to become more like Christ.

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

There is therefore a constant theme in the Bible that we respond to freedom by putting God’s life on display.

In order to do this, as “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation”, set apart for God’s purposes, Israel was not only given instructions for worship, but they were also given laws in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, through which this life might be demonstrated.

Importantly, the laws were given after God had re-established His covenant with His people at Mount Sinai. In other words, they were to obey them in response to God’s love for them, and not to earn it.

These laws:

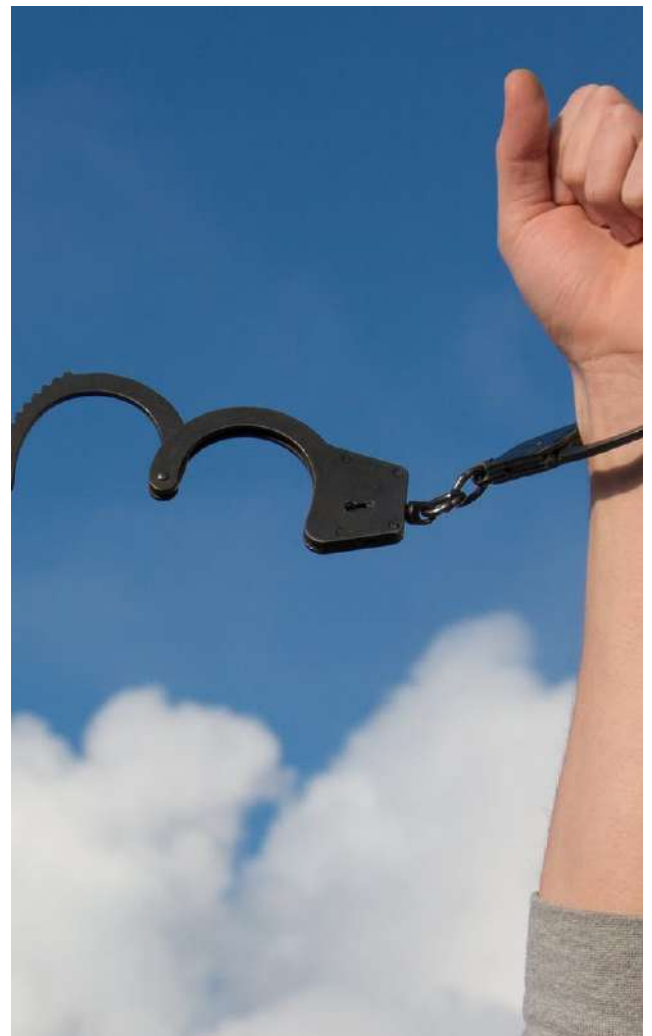
### **Placed a value on human life and dignity.**

Some of the laws of that time valued property above people – making the punishment for stealing greater than that for murder. Israel’s law always places the value of people above that of property believing that only people, of all God’s creations, have been made in His own image.

### **Placed a value on the land and on every area of life.**

As the people of Israel move into the Promised Land Joshua describes it as a “good land” (Joshua 23:15) – a place like a second Eden, which the people cannot exploit.

The detailed laws they are given show how to manage the land properly but also show how concerned God is for every area of life.



**Placed justice at the heart of God's people.** When we looked at "transforming the unjust structures of society" in 'Joining in with the Spirit' as a mark of mission, we saw that God's people were called to pursue righteousness and justice. The belief that all are made in God's image results in peace or "shalom" for everybody, and everything.

**Seeking justice for all was to be a defining feature of God's people, which set them apart.**

Because they had received God's freedom, the only reasonable response was to seek justice for other people made in God's image - to love their neighbour as they loved themselves.

In fact, as the *Bible Project* points out, "This is a unique Jewish-Christian contribution to the history of human civilisation.

For contrast, the entire Greek-Roman political system was built on the concept that all humans were not created equal. Aristotle argued that only rational humans (which did not include slaves) were equal. Therefore slavery was deemed just and right."

The Bible often uses the words justice and righteousness interchangeably, because the two help create each other. If, for example, people live in right relationship with the land, they will not exploit it in an unjust way.

This is captured in the Hebrew word for justice (*mishpat*) which can refer to two things. The first is dealing with what has gone wrong with just punishment (retributive justice).

But the second is a much more active meaning - working to restore what has been broken (restorative justice). This second meaning is the most common - God's people are called to speak up for those who have no voice and rescue the disadvantaged. "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." (Isaiah 1:17)

In the Old Testament there are two main things that distinguish God's people: being a worshipping community and being a community of justice for all - even the outsider. "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you." (Deuteronomy 16:20)

As the story progresses, it is clear that the main mark of God's people was to be concern for justice for four particular vulnerable groups (the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor), more than religious worship.



"Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5: 23-24)

Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats to illustrate God's heart for the oppressed. (Matthew 25:31-46). He points out the hypocrisy of those who continue their religious duties but use them to cheat the poor (Mark 7:1-10).

He tells another parable to promise, "...will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." (Luke 18:7-8)

Ultimately Christ lived with righteousness and justice but died on behalf of the guilty. Through Him, God's people are declared righteous before God not because of anything they've done, but because of what Jesus did for them.

The Christian response to this righteousness God gives us in Christ is to continue this story seeking a world in which we are compelled and given power to act on behalf of those who are oppressed.

# Understanding key themes: How did the experience of being in exile shape the Bible story, and how does it shape us?



The Jewish Scriptures were collected together at a time when God's people were adjusting to a huge shock.

They had been taken off into exile (Israel in 772 BC and Judah in 586/7 BC) after warnings from prophets such as Amos and Hosea who warn of a Day of the Lord when judgment would come.

They had been driven from the land God had promised them, and the Temple had been destroyed. Lamentations describes how catastrophic this felt: "All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her maidens grieve, and she is in bitter anguish." (Lamentations 1:4)

Psalms 80, one of several psalms written in this time cries out, "Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish." (Psalm 80:16)

The whole story of the Bible is shaped by this experience of being driven from 'home', and longing to return. Reading it with this understanding not only helps us understand the Bible, but also sheds light on how we can experience discipleship in the world as it is.

## **Exile is the human story.**

The story of exile begins in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve being driven from their 'home'. The link between the experience of the Jewish people in Babylon and this deeper story about our alienation is made clear in Genesis.

Here, the exile created by sin leads to human beings revealing how far they are from home by attempting to build a city, Babel – a city with the very same name as the city to which the people of Judah were taken captive.

In the same way that our fallen condition has led to spiritual exile, so the Jewish prophets warned God's people that their repeated patterns of disobedience and injustice were the reason exile was happening.

Before the exile Amos says, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins....An enemy will overrun your land, pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses." (Amos 3: 2,11)

Jeremiah warns, "Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!'...if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever." (Jeremiah 7: 4-7)





The Bible reveals that exile is not shown to be God's desire for His people, but the consequence of their and our actions.



### **Exile shapes how God's people live in the world.**

In exile, God's people found themselves having to shape an identity within a culture that was opposed to the values of God's Kingdom. In the context of the destruction of former certainties, many of the Scriptures were put together in order to reinforce this identity.

Daniel is the story of a Jew in Babylon fifteen years before Jerusalem is destroyed, who demonstrates how God's people live in exile – both then and now. He combines two things: he refuses to compromise His faithfulness to God, or to worship other idols in a culture which puts him under tremendous pressure to do so.

At the same time, he rises to political heights in Babylon, managing to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God has carried you into exile” as Jeremiah puts it. (Jeremiah 29:7)

This combination of being in “exile” in the world in terms of not being shaped by a lot of its values, and yet, knowing that God is not abandoning His world, continuing to join in with its restoration, is the balance Christians are called to live in.

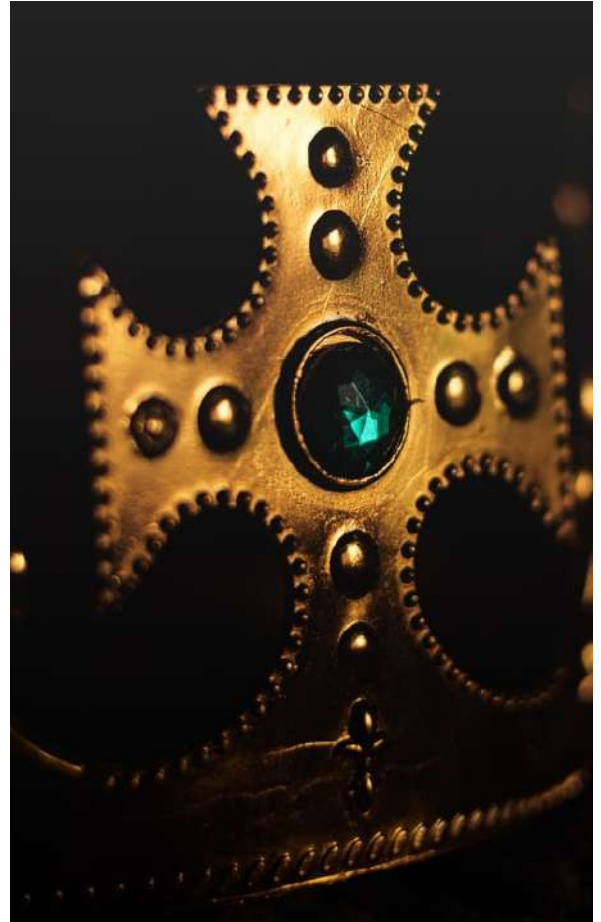
Many years after the exile, Paul describes this tension when he reminds the Philippian Christians that many who live around them oppose the life of God's kingdom, but that their true home is to come: “...our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...” (Philippians 3: 20).

While Christians may continue to feel in exile in the world, Paul is not saying that they will return to another place called heaven one day, but that they are ambassadors for the life of heaven on earth – a good earth which one day God will restore, and in which they will be fully at home in again.

Christians continue to live in “exile” in the world which belongs to God. (See the handout 'How involved can Christians be in the world?') The story of the Bible shapes us in living faithfully as those who are in the world, but not of it.

### **Exile points to the Messiah.**

Right from the beginning of the Bible story there is a theme of God's solution to our “exile” coming through a promised “anointed king” which runs throughout the Old Testament and helps us understand the mission of Jesus.



A series of promises build a picture of this figure. In Genesis, God warns the snake, who has brought evil into the world, that an offspring of the woman shall come who “will crush your head (but) you will strike his heel”. (Genesis 3:15)

Later Judah is promised that a royal figure will come from his family line “... and the obedience of the nations shall be his”. (Genesis 49:11)

The crucial promise is to David. God tells him, “I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

I will be his father, and he will be my son. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7: 12-16)

As the Old Testament period developed, Jewish belief began to focus on a particular person or earthly ruler – the messiah or anointed one. This ruler would be a descendant of David and would usher in an era of peace for Israel.



Famously Isaiah predicted: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever." (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Through the experience of exile, and between the end of the Old Testament and the New, in which the Jewish people were invaded by different nations, the hope that this Messiah would be a royal, priestly, representative human-figure who would restore Israel grew. Exile was not the end of the story.

#### **Exile points to a restoration of home.**

Even in the Old Testament the people's longing for return home is not spoken of just with reference to the restoration of the land or Temple but to a global renewal.

Chapters 60-66 Isaiah paint a picture in which Israel shall once again be God's bride, (62:5) but that God will "create new heavens and a new earth" in which God's exiled creation is fully restored:

"Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,' says the Lord." (66: 17-25).

It is through this hope of return for the whole world that Christians understand the coming of Jesus as Messiah, and, as we shall see, anticipate the very same hope being fulfilled in the restoration of all things.





# Tricky question: How might I understand the dark and violent pictures of God in the Bible?



As much as we have been able to see God's covenant love for people and creation through looking at themes in the Jewish scriptures, it is equally true that the story of the Old Testament contains material that leads writers such as Richard Dawkins to write that,

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

This can be a huge stumbling block for many. For Christians, who see God's character fully revealed through Jesus, it is hard to honestly square this with a god who performs violence himself - undoing His creation in the flood - or commands human beings to do violence ("...when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy." (Deuteronomy 7:2))

The exile Psalm 137 relishes violence: "Blessed is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Exodus describes God as a "warrior" (15:3) while in Deuteronomy God promises, "I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh." (32:41-42) Even in the New Testament, the violent imagery of Revelation can be disturbing to our picture of God.

It is not helpful to deny such passages, nor to ignore how savage they are. But this creates a moral problem - how can we believe in a god who seeks violence and war?

We must also avoid the kind of language which portrays the God of the Jews as somehow less compassionate and loving - as we have seen, the covenant-God of the Old Testament is consistent in His love and faithfulness throughout the Bible.

It is hard as well to reconcile this with the picture of God through Jesus who told His disciples to love their enemies, refused to call down fire on His enemies (Luke 9: 51-56) and most importantly died for His enemies on the cross.

Christians have wrestled with this in three ways. Some, like Augustine, have said that **both texts reveal truths about God** - that He is loving and violent or vengeful. The issue here is that the New Testament portrays Jesus as the exact representation of God in whom the "whole fulness of God" lives. (Colossians 2:8)

It is hard to reconcile the different portraits without easily ending up with two gods (some people think of an Old Testament and New Testament God), or seeing Jesus only as one side of God.

Others have said that **the Old Testament should be rejected** - Marcion was a famous example of this approach. The issue here is Jesus' own rejection of that route in regularly referring to the Scriptures and saying that not one "stroke of it will pass away". (John 10:35)

Others, such as Origen have said that the **Old Testament needs to be seen (and sometimes reinterpreted) through the lens of the New** in order to hold on to two truths:

The fact that Jesus **endorses the Old Testament.**

But that as the full revelation of God, He sometimes **contradicts the portrayal of God's character in it.**

What might help us reconcile these two ideas? The writer Greg Boyd has offered several approaches seeking to wrestle with this.



## **Facing up to evil, and seeing God's judgment as His withdrawal**

He points out that we might acknowledge that the Bible is a book which is **unafraid to describe the results of human sin** in warfare and conflict.

The Bible also consistently reveals that there are **cosmic forces of evil** – sometimes represented in symbols by the chaos of “hostile waters” or monsters such as a Leviathan, sometimes described as satan – “the whole world is under the control of the evil one”. (1 John 5:19)

Boyd argues that in some instances the violence of God in the Old Testament is more a question of God leaving people to their own devices and **allowing evil to run its course**.

In Genesis God says, “Then the Lord said, “My Spirit will not contend with humans forever...” (6:3) In other words, God can only go so far in restraining evil.

He writes that many of the times God judges people are about Him **withdrawing His presence**, and turning people over to consequences of choices. Sin carries its own judgment.

Psalm 7:15 states, “The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.” Isaiah says to God “...for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.” (64:7)

In Psalm 106 God's response to Israel's many sins (including child sacrifice) is that “He gave them into the hands of the nations.” (106:41)

In Romans Paul repeats how God's judgment is seen in how he “gave them over to” the results of their sin. (1: 24,26,28)

There is a consistent theme in the Bible of God not wanting to use violence or punish directly, but nevertheless **allowing others as free agents to do so by withdrawing**.

This is most clearly illustrated on the cross, in which as Christ is “forsaken” by God, others are free to crucify Him. But throughout the Old Testament the violence is often perpetrated by others – even though God takes responsibility for what wicked humans (or angelic beings) do.



God takes responsibility for the death of the firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 12:12) but it is a “destroyer” who carries it out (Exodus 12:23). Moses warns the people of Israel that if they forsake God “The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed...” (Deuteronomy 28:20) but three chapters later God says, “I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, ‘Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?’” (31:17)

Finally, Israel and Judah go into exile because, “...the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and *gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence.*” (2 Kings 17: 18-20)

Despite allowing people to experience this chaos, God is always grieving over their pain. Hosea portrays this compassion at the heart of God: “How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused...I will not carry out my fierce anger...For I am God, and not a man...” (Hosea 11: 8-9)

## **Trusting in the clearest picture of God's character**

Yet while acknowledging that not all the dark and difficult passages of the Bible are about God acting directly, nevertheless there are still over 1,000 passages in which God commands or acts violently in the Bible, particularly as the Israelites take over the Promised Land.

To this Boyd offers four other thoughts:

**However we understand these passages, it must be through the lens of the clearest picture of God's character the Bible gives us.**

As we have already seen, in a general sense a key way of understanding the meaning of individual parts of the Bible is always to see them through the lens of Jesus, who fully reveals God's character.

Looking at Jesus on the cross reveals the full heart of God as one who loves His enemies, takes on our sin, becomes disfigured and scarred and empties Himself, becoming nothing, out of self-sacrificial love for humankind.

**Unless we trust that the cross is the most complete way in which God's character is shown to us**, and see the rest of the Bible through that, we will be forced to think that the violent portraits of God actually reveal His character.

But Boyd argues that if the God on the cross is the same God as of the Old Testament, God is doing something else in being presented as violent which is consistent with His self-sacrificial love.

Boyd uses an analogy of an imaginative story where he happens to see his wife across the street. Before he can get close enough to greet her, he observes her walking up to someone who is begging, stealing his cap, knocking over his collection cup, and kicking him over in his wheelchair.

But because he knows and trusts his wife after 37 years of marriage, he cannot believe that these actions truly reflect her character. Instead there must be something else going on.

In the violent portraits of God, what could be going on that is consistent with the loving God we see in Christ crucified?

**Self-emptying: God is allowing human beings to see Him as ugly in order to reach them.**

If the cross reveals what God is truly like, then it shows what God has always been like - even from the beginning of the story. On the cross, we see that, because of His self-emptying love, God in Christ was willing to appear to many as a criminal, and under the curse of sin.



If this is the case, Boyd asks whether we shouldn't expect to find other examples in the Bible of God revealing himself by stooping to bear the sin of his people, taking **on an ugly appearance that mirrors the ugliness of their sin?**

When we come to ugly sinful portraits of God that contradict the beauty and holiness of God revealed on the cross, one question to ask is whether what we are seeing is God's willingness to be viewed as less than He is, out of a loving desire to be in relationship with sinful human beings.

We have already seen how God allows Old Testament authors to portray Him as violent, whereas in fact He often had only permitted violence.

Perhaps another element to understanding the way that the cross-bearing God risks being seen as ugly is to read the violent passages as God allowing Himself to be seen as being like the vengeful gods of other surrounding cultures **because that is what people expect Him to be.**







In the Ancient Near East people saw their gods' violence as something to be praised and they would have naturally believed that God told Moses to slaughter everyone. **But could it be that God allows people to perceive Him in this way in order to move them towards gradually understanding what He is really like?**

**Self-adapting: God is accommodating Himself to human behaviour in order to be in relationship with human beings.**

This is consistent with something else Christ reveals about God – that He is willing to stoop down and enter into our humanity to reach us. God adapts Himself to us by becoming a human being, knowing that, in our own fallen state, we are not able to see Him as He fully is.

The famous hymn from Philippians reveals how God is willing to go to the furthest extreme possible – becoming His opposite - in order to accommodate Himself to us. In becoming human, Jesus, “being in very nature God...made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2: 6-8)

Boyd uses the example of how even as humans we accommodate ourselves to reach others by telling a story about missionaries who lived with a tribe that practiced female circumcision.

Because they could not force the tribe to stop the practice, they remained silent while they built relationship, even appearing to condone it by offering medical sanitation and clean equipment - taking on the appearance of that ugly sin. After three years the tribe began to become Christians – as a result of which they began to stop the practice.

Another perspective on what is happening in the violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament is therefore understanding how, in His love, God always comes alongside people as they are, **even if this means appearing to condone aspects of their sin.**

Because God's self-giving love never forces people to change, He necessarily must bear with us, seeking to *influence* His people towards His love – a pattern we see through the Bible.

God accommodates things early in the story which are then left behind as the story progresses - allowing His people to practise polygamy for a time, to have a king even though His ideal is no king, to see Him as violent, even though He loves His enemies enough to die for them.





**Self-giving: God allows our picture of Him to develop throughout history and the Bible, at cost to Himself.**

God's self-giving love leads Him to allow us to have the freedom to see Him as less than He is, and leads Him to accommodate Himself to our behaviour.

A final principle in interpreting the violent passages of the Bible well is in grasping the way in which God allows people's understanding of Him to develop. This is true in the Bible, but still true for us today.

For example, Isaiah talks about how God can only teach some of His people in very simple ways - they are like weaned children who need simple instructions and are not ready for the full picture. (Isaiah 28:9-11)

Because we are His covenant-partners, God allows us to **have genuine freedom in growing to understand Him more over time.** As we have seen as well, His "breathing" into the writing of Scripture does not remove the human voice either - God *influences* Scripture more than He dictates it. This means that what is revealed about God through the Bible progresses and grows (Progressive Revelation).

For example, the letter to the Hebrews talks in detail about how much of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ: The temple worship has become only "an illustration for the present time," (9:9) "The (Old Testament) law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves..." (10:1) Talking of how animal sacrifices are no longer needed, the writer says, how Jesus "sets aside the first to establish the second". (10:9)

The same God is walking with His covenant-people, accommodating Himself to them, allowing them to see and portray Him as less than He is, and their understanding to develop over time.

Boyd argues that this is because God is most fully seen through the self-giving love of the cross.

When we read violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament on the surface they are terrible, but could it be that they reveal a cross-bearing, self-emptying God who will allow humans to see Him in whatever way they want in order to reach out to them in love?

