

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

The dark and violent pictures of God in the Bible - 1



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: In these two sessions we are going to be wrestling with some of the ways God is portrayed as violent in the Bible. This week we will be looking at the problem in detail, and starting to think about some possible ways of approaching it. Next session we will look specifically at how the way we see Jesus on the cross can offer a way forward. The handout for both sessions is attached, but we will only look at side one this week. N.B. There is a lot to think about, but the hope is that by the end we can have confidence that the God of the WHOLE Bible is a God of self-giving love!

Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

What parts of the Bible do you find difficult?



Understanding the information (25 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Through the whole Bible – Old and New Testaments - we read of God's covenant love for His people and His creation. But it is equally true that the story of the Bible contains difficult 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 believe God's character is fully revealed through Jesus, it is hard to honestly square what Jesus is like with a god who performs violence Himself by undoing His creation in the flood.

He also 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). 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, or to ignore how savage they are. But this creates a moral problem – how can we believe in a god who seeks violence and war? 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.

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

Christians have wrestled with this in three ways. Some, like Augustine, have said that all texts reveal truths about God – that He is both 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 God’s violence with Jesus without easily ending up with two gods (some people think of an Old Testament and New Testament God) or seeing Jesus as only one side of God.

Others have said that the Old Testament should be rejected – Marcion was a famous example of this approach. But Jesus’ rejected that route. He regularly referred to the Old Testament Scriptures and said that not one “stroke of it will pass way.” (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. This means we can do two things at the same time:

Hold on to 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 the way that Jesus endorses the whole Bible, but seems to sometimes contradict its darker parts? There is not one answer, but 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.

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)

Discuss: Cosmic forces, being honest about human sin, God leaving people to their own consequences, God’s grieving heart...how much does this begin to address some of the darker things in the Bible? How much does it make sense of the way life is?

Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:

<https://youtu.be/3pbXluY8chY>

What struck you as important in the video?



Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Psalm 103: 8-18 which describes God’s character.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:

What does this passage teach me about God?

What does this passage teach me about people?

How does this passage call me to obey God?

What might I do in response to this this week?



Responding to God’s leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Watch, O Lord, with those who wake,
or watch, or weep tonight,
and give your angels charge over those who sleep.
Tend your sick ones, O Lord Christ.
Rest your weary ones.
Bless your dying ones.
Soothe your suffering ones.
Pity your afflicted ones.
Shield your joyous ones.
And for all your love's sake.
Amen.

Attributed to St Augustine



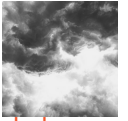


How might I understand the dark and violent pictures of God in the Bible?

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction...a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a ... racist, ... malevolent bully." Richard Dawkins

The violence of the Bible

can be a huge stumbling block for many. For example, God telling His people **"...when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you...you must destroy them totally...and show them no mercy."** (Deuteronomy 7:2) or God saying, **"I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh."** (32:41-42). In the New Testament, the violent imagery of Revelation can be disturbing to our picture of God. It is hard 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**. 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.



Christians have wrestled with this in three ways.

Both texts reveal truths about God – that He is loving and violent or vengeful. But it is hard not to end up with two "gods".

Reject the Old Testament (Marcion) – but Jesus did not do this.

Reinterpret the Old Testament 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?

God is not the cause of a lot of the Bible's evil. The Bible also consistently reveals that there are cosmic forces of evil with free choice – "hostile waters" or monsters such as a Leviathan, or satan – **"the whole world is under the control of the evil one."**(1 John 5:19)

When God withdraws His presence. In some instances the violence of God is more a question of God leaving people to their own devices and allowing evil to run its course. Isaiah says to God **"for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins."** (64:7).

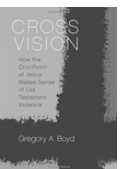
God does not use violence or punish directly but allows others as free agents to do so by withdrawing. This is most clearly illustrated on the cross, in which **as Christ is "forsaken" by God, others are free to crucify Him.**

God's grieving over the pain of people's rebellion:"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

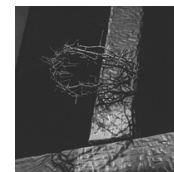
Even though not all violence in the Bible is about God acting directly there are still over 1,000 passages in which God commands or acts violently in the Bible. Recently Greg Boyd has argued that however we understand these passages, **it must be through the lens of the clearest picture of God's character the Bible gives us.** He tells 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 over him 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.**



Looking at Jesus on the cross reveals the full heart of God as one who loves His enemies, 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,** we will be forced to think that the violent portraits of God actually reveal His character.

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

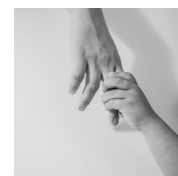
Self-emptying: The cross-bearing God is allowing human beings to see Him as ugly in order to reach them.



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. God reveals himself by stooping to bear the sin of his people, taking on an ugly appearance that mirrors the ugliness of their sin, out of a loving desire to be in relationship with sinful human beings.

Perhaps one way of understanding the way that the cross-bearing God risks being seen as ugly helps us to read 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. God allows people to perceive Him in this way, at cost to Himself, 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.

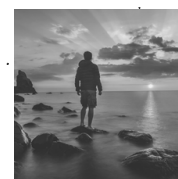


In Christ God is willing to stoop down and enter into our humanity to reach us, adapting Himself to us by becoming a human being, knowing that, in our own fallen state, we are not able to see Him as He fully is.

Boyd argues that in His love, God always comes alongside people as they are, even if this means appearing to condone aspects of their sin.

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

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



God allows people's understanding of Him to develop. This is true in the Bible, but still true for us today. Because we are His covenant-partners, God allows us to have genuine freedom in growing to understand Him more over time.

God influences Scripture more than He dictates it. This means that what is revealed about God through the Bible progresses and grows (Progressive Revelation).

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

This is entirely what you would expect from 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. Beneath the surface of the ugly portrayals of God is self-giving, humble love.