

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

The dark and violent pictures of God in the Bible - 2



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: Last time we considered the problem of how sometimes Jesus, our fullest picture of God, seems to contradict some of the stories and images of God elsewhere in the Bible. Yet Jesus also relies on the whole of Scripture. We began to look at how the darker things in the Bible may be a reflection of the reality of human evil, spiritual battle, how God withdraws from people allowing us to feel the consequences of our actions, and how His heart grieves for human pain. This week we ask, “If the fullest picture we have of God is Jesus on the cross, what does this show us about God’s character? And how can this help?” N.B. because the content is quite full, and there are lots of Biblical references in it, our biblical focus will be in the prayer time.

Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why is Jesus on the cross the fullest picture of God’s character?



Understanding the information (30 minutes)

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

We saw last session that not all violence in the Bible is 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.



How do we respond to this? Greg Boyd in “Cross Vision” develops this key idea. However we understand these passages, it must be through the lens of the clearest picture of God’s character the Bible gives us. The main 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. But 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.

Boyd argues that if the God on the cross is the same God as of the Old Testament, then in being presented as violent God is doing something else, 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 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.

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

Self-emptying: 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 we 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?

Perhaps another element to 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.

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 God allows people to perceive Him in this way in order to move them towards gradually understanding what He is really like. What a self-emptying thing to do!

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

Christ reveals how God 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 - 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. God allows us to have genuine freedom in growing to understand Him more over time. For example, the letter to the Hebrews talks in detail about how much of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. 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, 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 Bible 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?

Discuss: If God is self-emptying, adapting and giving to this extent, how much could we see His love in His willingness to let us see Him in different, and sometimes violent, ways?

Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of how God has borne with your limited understanding. How have you seen Him as “less than He is”? How has your understanding changed and grown?



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)

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Isaiah 53: 2-3



Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”
Galatians 3: 13

Thank you that you let us see you without your glory, marred by our ugliness, out of sheer love.
May your glory be our only desire.
Amen.

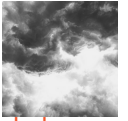


How might I understand the dark and violent pictures of God in the Bible?

"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).

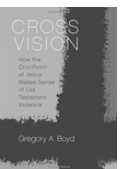
God does not use violence or punish directly but allows others as free agents to do so by withdrawing. This is most clearly illustrated on the cross, in which **as Christ is "forsaken" by God, others are free to crucify Him.**

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

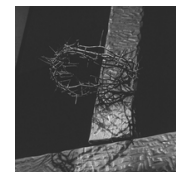
Even though not all violence in the Bible is about God acting directly there are still over 1,000 passages in which God commands or acts violently in the Bible. Recently Greg Boyd has argued that however we understand these passages, **it must be through the lens of the clearest picture of God's character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

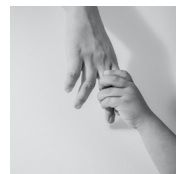
Self-emptying: The cross-bearing God is allowing human beings to see Him as ugly in order to reach them.



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.

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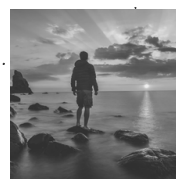


In Christ God is willing to stoop down and enter into our humanity to reach us, adapting Himself to us by becoming a human being, knowing that, in our own fallen state, we are not able to see Him as He fully is.

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.

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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.