

# If God exists then why are so many wars fought in the name of God?

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Text: Joshua 10:12-14 and Matthew 5:9

Theme: Our critics condemn religion because it seems to be the cause rather than the antidote to much of the violence and war in the world today. But is it really the cause or do religion and our faith offer hope and a better vision?

Ever wonder how the God of the Old Testament who sounds so vengeful and violent transforms to the God of the New Testament as described by Jesus? Ever wonder why people of faith who talk about loving one another seem to have the hardest time putting that love into action? Ever wonder why Muslims keep fighting Hindus, Catholics keep fighting Protestants, Shiites keep fighting Sunnis, Jews keep fighting Muslims, and the list goes on and on?

What if there was no religion? What if we arrived at a place where we had NO religious differences – do you think we would see an end to violence and war?

Let us pray...

Today's sermon is the third in the series "If God exists..." and today we will be exploring one of the biggest complaints that our critics have against us. We will be examining the question "If God exists then why are so many wars fought in the name of God?" I would ask if you have not been able to hear or read the first two sermons in this series that you go to our website and download an audio or written copy to bring you up to speed. I believe they are thought-provoking pieces and are worth reading again and again as we continue to be in journey together. I would also ask that you take out your sermon handouts and follow along.

This last week in Disciple Bible study the groups moved from weeks of troublesome texts describing wars, invasions, and holy judgment to the wisdom literature. There was a universal sigh of relief in the transition because it was tough for us to keep reading about a God who condoned and in some cases ordered generals like Joshua to go in and wipe out entire cities and towns. In today's language it seemed like we were reading about holy ordained genocide and it was troubling.

There were times when some of us in the class would have agreed with the new wave of atheist critics who say we worship a blood thirsty God and that religion is indeed the "most potent source of human conflict."<sup>1</sup> Let me read a quote from Sam Harris, which I might add represents most of the views of other atheists today.

"Religion raises the stakes of human conflict much higher than tribalism, racism, or politics ever can, as it is the only form of in-group/out group thinking that casts the differences between people in terms of eternal rewards and punishments. One of the enduring pathologies of human culture is the tendency to raise children to fear and demonize other human beings on the basis of religious faith. Consequently faith inspires violence in at least two ways. First, people often kill other human beings because they believe the Creator of the Universe told them to do it. Second, far greater numbers of people fall into conflict with one another because they define their moral community on the basis of religious affiliation."<sup>2</sup>

Once again there is some truth to this accusation but I am not sure all of violence and war can be laid at the doorstep of religion and faith. In fact today I would like to propose that faith; especially the Sermon on the Mount kind of life-giving ethic represents our only source of hope for a world beyond violence and war.

This morning I would like to examine three major criticisms that include: 1) the Judeo-Christian Bible is a violent text; 2) our Judeo-Christian history is filled with violence; and 3) religion is the cause of violence and war and not the antidote. So let's start with the criticism of our Bible.

You heard a text read today from the book of Joshua about a time when the most famous general in Hebrew history commands God to stop time, to slow the spinning of the world so that his army might have more time to slaughter their foes and wreak vengeance on their enemies. The closing line of the passages says so much, "There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded a human voice; for the Lord fought for Israel."<sup>3</sup> Clearly God is on the side of Israel and will go to the extremes of turning back time so that vengeance is complete.

There are dozens and dozens of texts like this where cities are destroyed; men women and children annihilated, or military campaigns are successful because of God being on the side of this strange tribe call Israel. Even a casual reader has to wonder why this God who creates humankind and calls it good shows such blinding partiality to a small tribe that is often rebellious and ungrateful to the exclusion and the detriment of their neighbors. Were the surrounding tribes more sinful? Were the Israelites great saints? No! So what gives?

Once again I turn to a continuum to try to answer this question because our theologies color the response. On one end of the continuum we would have those who would say this is exactly what happened and that the descriptions are very accurate. God is a very jealous God and one of the worst sins (top of the list of the Big 10) is worshipping other gods and that is what the neighbors were doing so they were greater sinners than the Israelites and needed to be eliminated. They would be in favor of doing the same thing today in the name of extending Christianity to the rest of the world and wiping out other conflicting religions.

The next position (and this is again a crude continuum but it makes a point) would state that God chose Israel to be the transforming presence in the world around them and the tribe and the land that was promised to them needed to be protected at all costs. Sometimes that protection comes at the high cost of moving others out of the way (war and violence) but in the end the end will justify the means.

The next position (and I am probably jumping two or three spots along the way) would be that history is written from the perspective of the victor. After all the loser is in no position to do any writing. Winners usually make the claim that God was on their side and then retell the stories with God influencing the battles, decisions, and the outcome. Today's text is a perfect example of that kind of "God on our side" rewriting of the text. God is so present that God listens to humankind and alters the rules of the universe just to kill more people.

Another position down this continuum would be that the Old Testament does not reflect the proper understanding of God. It is an immature view and description and the true revelation of God comes through Jesus Christ and his words of forgiveness, peace, mercy, and grace.

Regardless of where you stand on this continuum we have to admit that some of the biblical passages are troubling especially when they overshadow other passages where God instructs humankind to be merciful to the alien in our midst, or to treat our neighbor with love, or to care for the marginalized in our communities and in the surrounding communities. There are themes of grace, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and justice that run throughout the Old Testament but they are often drowned out by the clamor of swords and spears.

Let's move on to the criticism that Christianity is a violent religion. When I say that what do you think of first? The Crusades of course. It is true. This was a terrible time in the history of Christianity

and yet we cannot ignore it and we should find ways of learning from it so we don't end up repeating our mistakes.

The Crusades started in 1095 and lasted about 180 years ending in 1276. It is easy to look at this series of military campaigns as being solely based on religious differences but if one studies the issues of the day you will quickly learn that there was politics, money, greed, and power that contributed to this "holy war." Let me give a quick history lesson to help us understand something that is going on today. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century the Turks (Muslims) still had a stronghold on most of the old Roman Kingdom including the Holy Lands. The powers and governments of Europe were more or less content to let the Muslims have their territory because they were engaged in petty battles among themselves that didn't amount to much. In a power shift Pope Urban II decided all of this petty fighting was going nowhere and there was no king or prince who could bring unity so it was time for the Church to step in. He did a clever thing which is still done today. He focused on an enemy outside the circle to unite the folks inside the circle.

The Turks had at one time in recent history destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the alleged location where Jesus was crucified, and he told the Christians that they were now going to build a mosque on the site. He also preached stories citing unmentionable atrocities that the Muslims were doing to Christians further enflaming the people. Finally he said that God had spoken to him and ordained a holy war and whoever fought in it would escape purgatory and would go straight to heaven. Doesn't that sound like things happening today? Doesn't it remind you of the Muslim clerics today who are offering 72 virgins in heaven for all those who die fighting the infidels? By all definitions this was a Christian Jihad.

On July 15, 1099 the Christian crusaders finally captured Jerusalem. It is a day that is remembered more by the Muslims than by Christians. In fact for them it is like our 9/11. On that day 40,000 Muslims, most of them innocent, were slaughtered and there was great rejoicing. The written accounts by those soldiers who were there and sent word back agree that the blood ran so deep that it was up to their ankles. This was all done in the name of Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.

How do we account for this distortion of the Gospel message? Can we say it was just a single incident and we learned and matured? No. After that we had terrible things like the Spanish Inquisition where people were tortured in the name of Christ and over a 140 year period it is estimated that nearly 149,000 people were imprisoned and tortured to find out if their conversion was authentic. Later there was the Thirty Years War in which Catholics and Protestants fought each other in central Europe with estimates of 20% or more of the populations being wiped out.

When we wonder today how Sunnis can fight with Shiites when they have their foundation in the same faith we need to look at what we Christians have done as well. We need to claim this as our history and understand the power that religion has in bringing about violence ESPECIALLY when it is linked to heavenly rewards or promises of escaping hell. But before we condemn religion altogether we need to remember it was our religious leaders who brought up the concept of a "just war." The criteria for a just war are printed in your handout and it recognizes humankind's flaws but tries to put holy boundaries around them. This was never something proposed in any secular institution. It came from religion.

Finally let me deal with the last criticism that religion is the cause of war and violence and if there was no religion there would be no war. Does that make sense to you? Is that your take on the world around us? One of my favorite pastors was contemplating this question and he started thinking about science fiction and all the Star Wars movies and all the Star Trek episodes. He said that every movie and episode involved violence, war, and some battle and yet never once was there any mention of religion.

He understands that it is a projected reality but even in this projection humankind (and all the other life forms in the universe) find plenty of things to fight over without adding religion to the equation.

I would ask you to think about your favorite sports – this on the day after the Seahawks won/lost in Green Bay. Most of the sports that we love involve contact and conflict. Football, soccer, wrestling, boxing, The Great American Gladiator, and hockey where you go to a fight and wait for a game to break out. Think for a moment about where junior sports have been heading lately and how violent soccer moms and dads have become as they attack refs and even other players in anger. There was no religion involved here.

Think about your own driving habits. When someone cuts you off on the freeway, or crowds into a line of cars that have been waiting patiently, or when someone goes into rage and uses a hand sign to tell you they are number one in their books what do you do? Do you invoke the name of God asking for a blessing or a curse? Is there religion involved here?

Think of office politics and some of the nastiness that takes place or think of those moments when the neighbor's dog is barking late at night for the sixteenth night in a row, or think about what happens when there is a huge demand for something that is in short supply. I remember the Tickle Me Elmo craziness that turned to Tackle me Elmo. Were the violence, anger and hostility done because of religion?

Did you know that there have been several governments and leaders who tried to do away with religion to create a better society? The two most recent examples are the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin and Communist China under Mao Tse-Tung. Both governments looked at religion as the “opiate of the people” and believed secular government could create a more just and peaceful world.

How did it work out? Under Stalin 54,200 churches were destroyed. Many of the leading lay members and the clergy were sent to Siberia where they died. Estimates vary but it is believed 3-7 million people were put to death under his rule. Was that better than religion?

Mao who led a great cultural revolution and initiated the “Great Step Forward” was also responsible for the 30-70 million deaths. Was religion to blame here?

Obviously there is a huge flaw in the logic of our critics. They are right in the fact that religion has committed terrible acts of violence and war distorting scripture and Jesus' message of forgiveness and grace BUT I believe Christianity offers hope. It is a religion that recognizes the fact that humankind is flawed and too often driven by greed, power, anger, arrogance, and the need to be in control and that we gravitate more towards violence and retaliation than towards forgiveness and grace. But the Gospel that was lived and preached by Jesus Christ calls us to a higher vision and offers an alternative.

Hear the text again from the Sermon on the Mount.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not murder...” “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister...”

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven”

Our secular critics say that we can change if we just try harder and perform better. It hasn't worked in the past and I don't suspect it will work in the future. Christ calls us to an alternative path – the path of transformation. When we invite God to work in our lives, when we surrender and walk humbly, when we are able to be taught new ways to deal with threats, fears, and doubts, then we can be transformed from within and can see the world around us in a different way.

Then we can see our enemies truthfully but not always respond in violence, retaliation and war. Then we can see those who hurt us through eyes of love and respond with forgiveness. Then we can break the cycles of eye-for-an-eye violence and retaliation and can begin to live in Kingdom peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Harris, "Letter to a Christian Nation," Alfred A. Knopf Pub., NY, NY 2006

<sup>2</sup> Harris, p80-81.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua 10:14 NRSV