

TOUGH QUESTIONS ...from the Old Testament

How Can a Holy God Promote Unholy Warfare?

A few months ago I received a note from one of our members. She wrote:

Dear Pastor David,

You asked if any of us had troubling questions about the Old Testament. I have had one for a long time that has been answered, but *never* to my complete satisfaction. ...

In the early days of Hebrew history, when the people were commanded by God to take over the promised land, they were also to completely annihilate the people who were currently living there, including animals, etc. My question is, why kill the children, and especially the babies?

I have a hard enough time with killing the adults, but I wonder why the *innocent* children must be killed as well. Why couldn't the children be spared and adopted out to Hebrew families who might want to raise them? ... It just seems like such a shame to put *innocent* babies to death when there would likely be many childless couples yearning to take them and raise them as their own.

It's almost like the question I ask God today, "Why do you allow so many women to have *abortions* when there are so many childless couples who would give anything to have a beautiful baby to adopt and raise?"

I so appreciate the honesty of this person. And very likely her question reflects your own questions about war in the Old Testament. I too have been bothered over the years by some of these same questions.

By the way, if you were not with us for the last two Sundays, I hope that you'll go to the web and get the messages, either in PDF format or on MP3. Those first two messages lay the foundation for what we'll be looking at today and over the next couple of Sundays.

Bottom line, the question is this: *How can a holy God promote unholy warfare?* The fact that he does is unavoidable. One of the key Old Testament passages that actually *commands* Israel to engage in battle is found in Deuteronomy 7:1-6.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations--the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and 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.* Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. Deuteronomy 7:1-6

These nations were under a “solemn ban” meaning that Israel was to take no slaves but that all human beings – including men, women and children – were to be killed and all objects of pagan worship totally destroyed. What is so disturbing about such passages (and there are other similar passages in the Old Testament)ⁱ is that here *God commands* such violence. After all, throughout history such events have taken place. But here God specifically *commands* Israel to annihilate these people. In fact, on one occasion God becomes angry with some in Israel – the tribes of Reubenites and Gadites – who *wouldn't* go to war. They wanted to just sit there while their fellow Israelites did all the fighting for them!

But how can a holy God promote unholy warfare? After all, *war is evil*. It produces loss of life and limb. It leaves behind orphans and widows. It indelibly mars – both physically and emotionally – those who participate or are innocently caught up in it. It often produces economic disaster. To deny that war is evil is only self-deception. Even David was prohibited from building the Temple, for he had “blood on his hands.”ⁱⁱ

Our View of God

So again *just how can* a holy God command such violence in the taking of human life? I believe part of the answer is found first of all in our view of God. First of all, God is a *sovereign* God carrying out a specific purpose in history. The command to exterminate the nations living in Canaan: Is this simply a case of a religious man (in this case, Moses and then Joshua) *thinking* he was doing God's will when in reality he was sorely mistaken? And yet even the New Testament endorses these passages as *a command from God*. Paul in Acts 13:19 says:

*He [God] overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Who overthrew these nations? It wasn't first of all Israel, but God. God is sovereign over life and reserves the right as to when to take life (Deut 32:39; Job 1:21). But why did He overthrow these nations? He did it in order to providentially prepare the way for the Savior of the world. God was establishing in Canaan a divine “counter-culture” designed to both arrest evil and accelerate the gracious plan and purpose of God.

By the way, we must remember that Israel was not a monarchy, or a democracy, but a *theocracy*. Israel as a nation had God as its ruler. That is why we must never take such passages and apply them to any nation today. Unfortunately, this has been done repeatedly down through the centuries. The first Crusade from Europe defeated its Muslim defenders in Jerusalem in the year 1099. Some 10,000 Muslims were beheaded in the great Mosque. They justified their actions by citing the Old Testament, confusing the unique role of Israel in the Old Testament with their own.

God is not only sovereign over nations and peoples. *God is also a righteous God*. Psalm 9:8 says, “He will judge the world in *righteousness*; he will govern the peoples with *justice*.” And Psalm 97:2 says, “Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.” When infinite justice and righteousness encounter chronic, willful evil and

injustice (as in the land of Canaan), there is violent war between the two. It is a war which God ultimately won at Calvary.^{iv}

As a righteous God, God is also a *warrior God*. The wars that Israel fought are called the “wars of the Lord.”^v Psalm 24:8 refers to God as the “Lord mighty in battle.” David says in Psalm 144:1 “Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.” Elsewhere God is called the “Lord of armies” or the “Lord of hosts,” both military terms.

What does the Old Testament mean, then, when God is called a “warrior?” It means simply that God, as a righteous God, must carry out his judgment against sin. Remember, evil is not only the opposite of good. Evil is all that stands *in opposition* to good. And opposition implies warfare. The Bible is a book of God’s war against evil, from Genesis 3 all the way to the end of Revelation. The wars of the Lord in the Old Testament are a demonstration of a righteous God’s judgment of sin.

The God of the Old Testament is a sovereign warrior God because he is a righteous God. But he is also a *merciful* God. God is repeatedly depicted in the Old Testament as a God of mercy and compassion (Ps 94:18-19; Lam 3:22). This is seen particularly in the way God told Israel to treat those nations surrounding the land of Canaan.

When you march up to attack a city, *make its people an offer of peace*. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, *lay siege to that city*. When the LORD your God delivers it into your hand, *put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves*. And you may use the plunder the LORD your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. *However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes*. Completely destroy them--the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites--as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God. Deuteronomy 20:10-18^{vi}

For the nations residing in the Promised Land, the command was to kill everything that has breath, including the children. But for the nations surrounding the Promised Land, the command was to spare the children and women. In fact, the kings of Israel had a reputation for the mercy they showed to their enemies outside of the land of Canaan. According to 1 Kings 20:31, the officials of Ben-Hadad, king of the Arameans, said to him, “Look, *we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful*. Let us go to the king of Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life.”^{vii}

Our View of Sin

Not only does our view of God affect how we understand war in the Old Testament. But there is also our view of sin. In the note I read earlier from one of our members, the question was asked,

“I wonder why the *innocent* children must be killed as well...It just seems like such a shame to put *innocent* babies to death...”

The fact is that these people – including women and children – were far from innocent. They were just like you and me, deserving death. The Bible, both in the Old and New Testament, constantly affirms that we are all born in sin and deserve death. “The wages of sin is death,” the Bible tells us. We will all die, it is only a matter of when and how (Hebrews 9:27).

There is a helpful passage in Leviticus 18 that gives us God’s perspective on the sinfulness of the nations inhabiting the land of Canaan. One purpose of God using his people to exterminate the Canaanites was the *degree* to which they had stooped in their rebellion against God:

“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. *Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.* But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Leviticus 18:24-28^{viii}

What were these sins? They included child sacrifice, sacred prostitution, and snake worship. Deuteronomy 12:31 describes these nations as “doing all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.” A temple unearthed some years ago proves the extent to which child sacrifice was accepted as a common practice. Within the temple, 75% of the bones unearthed belonged to children between the ages of 3 and 14.^{ix}

No wonder God describes the land as “vomiting out its inhabitants.” Think of the last time you had to throw up. It’s not a very nice thing to think about, is it? And when you finally do throw up, you want to get rid of it quick. This is how God describes the defilement and sin of these nations.

For 400 years the land was in convulsions, wanting to vomit out the people because of their sin. Apparently, God was unwilling to destroy these nations until their sins had reached a point where there was no other alternative. God tells Abraham in Genesis 15:16 – “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”^x But there finally came a time for radical surgery in order to eliminate the deadly cancer of sin.

But what about the children? We know that God is just in his judgments. We also believe that, given the sinful context into which they were born, God was in an act of mercy sparing these children from an even greater evil. Remember the verse we looked at last week in Isaiah 57:1?

The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.

Could it be that God in his wisdom and providence took the lives of these Canaanite children as an act of mercy? Could it be that He took them into His presence, sparing them the horror of being sacrificed to pagan deities?

Probably what bothers us most in all of this is that on these occasions God chose to use His own people, the nation of Israel, as the *means* in carrying out judgment. After all, we would not be as troubled if God had used other pagan nations to exterminate the Canaanites. Nor would we be as troubled if they had been exterminated by some type of natural disaster.

I've asked myself: What is the difference between destroying men, women, children and infants by means of the flood (Genesis 6-8) or by the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), and on the other hand using the military might of His chosen people? The means are different, but the result is the same – men, women and children divinely judged because of sin. In fact, this will once again take place in the future when a third of mankind is killed instantly (Revelation 9:18).

In all of this, *God is impartial in his judgment*. We must not forget that just as God providentially used the nation-state of Israel to bring divine judgment upon the evil nations of the land promised to Israel, so He also later in Israel's history used the vicious warfare of the surrounding nations to judge His own people. And in both instances, the lives of men, women and children were taken as a form of judgment against sin.

I personally wish it didn't have to be this way. I would have preferred that God would have accomplished his purposes of judgment and redemption in some other way. I don't like the violence. But then again, I see that God works in the world as it is...even to the point of suffering himself the violence of the cross. And I'm so glad He did.

The story of the Bible cannot be understood apart from this theme of warfare. This is because the God of the Bible is at war, not against nations and people whom he loves, but against the sin and injustice that he hates. The amazing paradox of the Biblical story is that the warrior God who commanded judgment by death for such horrendous sin, himself suffers a violent death at the hands of sinful men.^{xi} Here's how Peter in his famous Pentecost message describes what took place:

This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. Acts 2:23

Listen to how Isaiah the prophet graphically describes the violence of Jesus' death:

He was oppressed and afflicted...
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter...
By oppression and judgment he was taken away...
For he was cut off from the land of the living...
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...
Isaiah 53:7-10

Why? So that we who trust in him can live forever. The New Testament is really no less clear than the Old Testament when it talks about God's judgment of sin. In fact, it is even more severe. While the Old Testament focuses on physical death as the judgment for sin, the New Testament focuses on eternal death as the judgment for sin. Jesus himself talks about the horrors of eternal judgment, describing it in graphic terms as a place where the "fire never goes out" (Mark 9:48).

The Good News is that the warrior God bore that penalty for you and me. God took upon himself the very sin that he hates. And in doing so, he revealed to us as never before his heart of compassion, mercy and love. "God demonstrated his love for us," Paul says, "in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

What are the implications of this topic for you and me today? First, we must take sin seriously. Jesus said, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out." God takes sin seriously and so should we. Second, we must remind ourselves of the reality of spiritual warfare that surrounds us on a constant basis. Ephesians 6 tells us to take up the full armor of God, not because we are fighting against flesh and blood, but rather against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. If anything, the warfare motif of the Old Testament is a reminder to you and me of the reality of *our* warfare against sin and evil.

Addendum: The following is a message related to the issue of warfare in the Old Testament that was given at Central Bible at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq.

When is it Right to Fight?
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ... a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build ... a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. Eccl 3:1-8

1. WHAT IS THE REAL CAUSE OF WAR? James 4:1-2

2. IS IT EVER RIGHT TO FIGHT?

Four viewpoints:

- The crusade or holy war.
- Christian pacifism.
- Christian nonresistance.
- The “just war” theory.

(1) In order to preserve _____ (Deut 7; 20:1-18; Ex 21:23-25; Rom 13:1-5; cf. Matt 5:39).

(2) In order to protect _____ (Prov 21:15; Ps 82:4; Gen 9:6).

(3) In order to prevent _____ (1 Pet 2:13-15; Ex 20:13).

3. WILL THE WORLD EVER HAVE PERMANENT PEACE? Isaiah 2:4

4. IS THIS THE FINAL WAR? Luke 21:8-9

5. HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO WAR?

(1) Trust God. Psalm 27:1-3

(2) Pray. 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Matthew 5:44.

(3) Seek peace. Psalm 34:14; Romans 12:18

(4) Support one another. Galatians 6:4

Introduction

On Wednesday evening, March 19th, the United States and its allies launched a preemptive military strike against the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Thus far it is estimated that our allied forces have lost over 45 lives. As for casualties among the Iraqis, both civilians and military, one can only guess.

Without a doubt, war is evil. It produces loss of life and limb. It leaves behind orphans and widows. It indelibly mars – both physically and emotionally – those who participate or are innocently caught up in it. It often produces economic disaster. To deny that war is evil is only self-deception.

There are various reactions to this war in the Christian community. This was seen quite clearly on a recent airing of Larry King Live. One of the callers said that it appeared that the real war was not in Iraq, but in the Christian community. But these reactions, however emotional they may be, are really not over whether or not war is good. The disagreement is over: (1) whether in this case war was entirely unavoidable; and (2) whether or not a Christian should ever support or be involved in military conflict. In other words, “When is it right to fight?” or better yet “Is it *ever* right to fight?”

But first, I would like to begin by answering a more basic question. And it is this...

1. WHAT IS THE REAL CAUSE OF WAR?

No here, the Bible leaves us with no doubt. Notice what James tells us:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

James 4:1-2 NIV

Whenever there is conflict, whether on a personal level or on a national and international level, the ultimate cause is the same. Somebody – or both parties – is exhibiting selfishness and pride. I want my way and you want your way and there is inevitable conflict. We all have grown up with this. Little children fight over the toys in their room. When they go to school they fight over the games in the playground. In high school and college they fight over the girls. Once out of school, we fight over our business dealings. That's war and James says that the root of such contention comes from our evil desires. What is the middle letter of “pride?” It is “I.” What is the middle letter of “sin?” It is “I.” We live in a fallen world. War is the problem of man's sinfulness written in large letters.

What initiated the Gulf War “Desert Storm” of 1991? Saddam Hussein wanted something that wasn't his. He wanted oil fields in Kuwait so he just took them. And what has provoked the present crises in Iraq? The Ba'ath regime in Iraq has wanted for itself – and at the expense of its own people – the use of weapons of mass destruction. And so in a certain sense our present crises is nothing but an extension of the Gulf War crises of 1991.

But irrespective of one's interpretation of the present crises and what has led up to it, a more basic question is this: Is it ever right to fight?

2. IS IT EVER RIGHT TO FIGHT?

Our passage in Ecclesiastes says, "*There is a time for war and a time for peace.*" Some have argued that these verses merely reflect the pessimistic world view of the author, which undoubtedly does come through at points in this book. However, these verses of chapter 3 follow on the heels of chapter 2:24-26 which is the *alternative* to pessimism. These verses reflect the perspective of the godly and not the ungodly. And yet the perspective is quite realistic. Sometimes war is the wrong thing. Sometimes war is the right thing.

But not all would agree. Over the centuries, four basic viewpoints have emerged as to how the Christian should view the terrible reality of war in the world.

The first perspective and most radical is termed the *crusade or holy war*. Fortunately those who hold this position in the western world are few and far between. The best example of this was the Crusades initiated by the State church in the 11th Century. Urban II urged his followers to free the Middle East from pagan control, promising them forgiveness of sin if they participated in the expedition. According to historians, some 10,000 Muslims were beheaded in the great Mosque by "Christian" crusaders. A modern example of this is Saddam Hussein himself who has recently promised his soldiers salvation for killing coalition troops.

On the other end of the spectrum is what we call *Christian pacifism*. Pacifists argue in favor of the law of non-retaliation, citing Jesus' words in Matthew 5:39 "*But I say unto you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*" The pacifist argues that this law of non-retaliation applies to both individuals and to governments, to both inter-personal relationships and to international relationships. In light of this, neither an individual nor a government, whether they be Christian or non-Christian, should engage in warfare since war always involves violence.

A more moderate approach within the pacifist camp is what is called then stance of *nonresistance*. Those who hold to this perspective argue that the command of Christ not to resist an evil person (Matthew 5:38-48) are binding *only* upon Christians and *not* government. The government then has the right to exercise lethal force, but *never* the Christian.

A fourth position, and one first spelled out with clarity by the church father, Augustine in the 5th Century, is called the *just war theory*. I've given you on the back of your notes the basic ideals of this perspective.

Our desire this morning, however, is not to debate theories and philosophies, but to look at what the Bible has to say about this question of war. When is it right to fight? Or is it *ever* right to fight?

As I look at the Bible, taken as a whole, it becomes apparent that warfare is a less-than-ideal necessity when it is carried out...

(1) In order to preserve justice.

That this is true is particularly clear in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word for “war” is found more than 300 times in the Old Testament. And in many cases war was waged by Israel at the command of God in order to carry out God’s righteous judgment upon the surrounding nations (Deuteronomy 7; 20:1-18). In fact, on one occasion God becomes angry with some in Israel – the tribes of Reubenites and Gadites – who *wouldn’t* go to war! They wanted to just sit there while their fellow Israelites did all the fighting for them!

When war is fought to preserve justice, this is not *retaliation*, but *retribution*. Society has the responsibility to maintain order and punish evildoers, both on a local, national and international level. For example, in Exodus 21:23-25 we read –

“...you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

Furthermore, the principle of Exodus 21 is both *just* and *merciful*. In the Ancient Near East grossly unjust and disproportionate punishments were commonly practiced. And so in contrast to the surrounding nations, God gives a balanced and just guideline for dealing with societal wrongs.

As we come to the New Testament, we find that there is absolute consistency between Exodus 21 and a passage such as Romans 13:1-5.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. Romans 13:1-5

While in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was a “theocracy” with the eternal God as its King, in the New Testament era we find that this unique role of Israel no longer exists. This is important to understand, for some – such as the Crusaders – have appealed largely to the Old Testament as justification for their religious wars. While there are today no “theocracies” with God as their head (and this would include the United States!), there is established government. And according to Paul, established government has the right and even the moral obligation to preserve justice.

How then do we understand such New Testament passages as Matthew 5:39 – “*But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*” Based on this verse, some argue that Jesus was a pacifist. And yet if Jesus had been a

total pacifist, would he not have urged the Roman Centurion to leave the Roman army and follow him? Jesus himself says in Matthew 24:6 “*You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed.*” Beyond this, on at least one occasion Jesus cleansed the Temple by force, using a whip He had made. It’s interesting that He on this occasion didn’t enter into diplomacy or discussions, saying “Would you guys please get out of here?” No, he forced them out!

What then does Jesus mean when he says “do not resist an evil person.” The meaning is this: we are not, *as individuals*, to carry out our own personal schemes of retribution. Jesus’ command in Matthew 5:39 refers to *individuals* and not to *governments*. It does *not* mean that justice no longer matters. It does *not* mean that there should be no law enforcement on a national or international level. In fact, “the law of love *embraces* but does not *exclude* retributive justice.”^{xii} Many of those who are crying out “peace, peace!” want a peace void of justice. But peace at any price is no peace at all. Peace at any price is nothing but appeasement.

(2) In order to protect innocent people.

When is it right to fight? It seems from the Bible that it is right to fight in order to protect innocent people. Proverbs 21:15 says, “*When justice is done it brings joy to the righteous but terror to the evildoers.*” And in Psalm 82:4 we read, “*Deliver the poor and the needy; free them from the hand of the wicked.*”

This principle, that it is right to fight in order to protect innocent people, is one of the criteria to determine what Augustine in the 5th Century termed a “just war.” A “just war” can only be fought with right intentions. For example, war is not justified to gain control of another nation, its assets or its people. If the right intention for going to war is not present, justice is not present. But one of the necessary intentions of a justifiable war is to protect innocent people from a despot or tyrannical regime.

Closely associated with the protection of innocent people is the truth of the dignity of human life. Some argue that the dignity of human life prohibits war and such local expressions of law enforcement such as capital punishment. And yet according to Genesis 9:6 the very reason capital punishment was given in the OT was *because* man is created in the image of God:

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” Genesis 9:6

How do such passages apply to the present crises in Iraq? Here I can only give my personal opinion as your pastor. You must wrestle as a Christian with the issues. Modern Iraq, as was the case with the countries of the Balkans, is largely the result of post-World War I divisions. It was in fact the League of Nations which, after WWI, gave to Kuwait, Iraq, Iran and other countries their national boundaries. In 1963 the Ba’ath party gained ascendancy in Iraq through a bloody military coup. Hussein, a Ba’ath himself, became president in 1979.

During the Iraq-Iran war, Hussein used chemical weapons against the Iranians and the Kurdish ethnic minority in northern Iraq. He has ruled through intimidation and fear. Political opponents have been disposed of in the most barbaric ways. His regime is noted for numerous

human rights violations. Most of all, Hussein has in no way complied with the terms of surrender he agreed to following the Persian Gulf war in 1991.

So then both love and justice are required to protect the innocent and repel aggression. That may be why John Steward Mills has said, “A man who has nothing which he is willing to fight for, nothing which he cares about more than his personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free.”

(3) In order to prevent the spread of evil.

When is it right to fight? It is right to fight in order to preserve justice. It is right to fight in order to protect innocent people. And thirdly I believe that the Bible teaches that it is right to fight in order to prevent the spread of evil. God has authorized the government to enforce the law and to punish offenders. The Apostle Peter states it this way:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 1 Peter 2:13-15

We are to submit to the authorities. Why? Because they are sent by God to “punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.” And in so doing, government helps to prevent the spread of evil.

Not long ago I was returning to Portland after cross-country skiing with my oldest boy at Mt. Hood Meadows. Wanting to get back by a certain time, I found myself speeding along at 65 miles per hour in a 55 mile per hour zone. Up ahead, on the right, was a State Trooper with his lights on. What did I do? I immediately put on the brakes! And as I passed him I gave a sigh of relief to know that he was too busy with another law breaker to come after me.

What is the role of governing authorities? It is to prevent the spread of evil. Those who liberated the death camps of Europe at the conclusion of World War II had not doubt about the necessity of defeating Hitler and Nazi Germany, and in so doing prevent the spread of evil.

And so we see that these passages do grant to government the right to use lethal force in maintaining peace, punishing evil doers, and preventing the spread of evil. And if this force can be appropriately used within a country with local and national law enforcement, it would follow that it can and should be used on a broader international scale.

But doesn’t the sixth commandment say “*You shall not kill*”? Should we commit evil in order to prevent evil? That doesn’t make sense. Is that what the sixth commandment really says? No, it says literally “*You shall not murder.*” Moses uses one of several words used in the OT meaning “to kill.” The implication of the word in its context is “you shall not murder.” Murder is a selfish act, where the life of a fellow man is considered to be of less value than what one hopes to gain in taking that person’s life.^{xiii}

Is there a difference between killing and murder? Absolutely. In the Mosaic law, capital punishment was allowed for at least 10 different crimes. Killing in self-defense was not a criminal offense. Therefore, “you shall not kill” cannot be taken to rule out all killing.

As C.S. Lewis has said, “All killing is no more murder than all sexual intercourse is adultery.”

When is it right to fight? It seems from the Bible that it is right to fight in order to preserve justice, to protect the innocent, to prevent the spread of evil. But can such less-than-ideal means ever bring about peace? Will the world ever have permanent peace?

3. WILL THE WORLD EVER HAVE PERMANENT PEACE?

Yes, someday there will be permanent peace, but not until the Prince of Peace, Jesus himself, returns to establish His kingdom. Isaiah and many other prophets describe what this will be like.

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Isaiah 2:4

Did you know that ironically this verse is written over the United Nations: “*They’ll hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.*” With it is a sculpture of a man hammering a sword into a plow. This sculpture was created by Soviet artist Evgeny Buchetich and presented to the United Nations in December of 1959 by the Russian government. But they forgot the most important part – “*He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.*” Who will do this? Jesus will – and not the United Nations! We’ll never have ultimate peace until Jesus establishes His reign on the earth.

4. IS THIS THE FINAL WAR?

Another question you may have on your mind this morning is this, “Is this the final war leading up to the second coming of Jesus Christ?” We do not know. Listen to these words of Jesus:

He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.” Luke 21:8-9

Less than 8% of the time since the beginning of recorded time has the world been entirely at peace. In a total of 3,530 years, only 286 have been warless. In the history of 185 generations, only ten of those generations have experienced unbroken peace. During this period 8,000 treaties have been broken. Mankind has initiated all sorts of alliances to maintain a balance of power in the world: disarmament conferences, the League of Nations, the United Nations, détente, NATO, etc. But all to little avail.

In Acts 1:8 the disciples ask a question about prophecy, and Jesus talks to them – not about prophecy – but about evangelism. While it is true that certain prophecies in Scripture, if taken literally, have yet to be fulfilled – such as the rebuilding of Babylon in present day Iraq (cf.

Rev. 17,18; Jer. 50, 51), we simply do not know what God's timetable is. Even Jesus didn't know (cf. Mark 13:32)! Though we definitely need to read the "signs of the times," our primary concern should be to share the Good News!

5. HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND DURING WAR?

Let me mention four things that should characterize our response to the present crises in Iraq. First of all, we should trust God.

(1) Trust God.

The Bible says, "*The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Though an army besiege me and war break out against me, even then I will be confident.*" Some of you may have friends, neighbors or family who are serving in Iraq. We accept the fact that when and where there is war, there are casualties. People lose their lives. But we trust God. We trust His sovereignty. We trust that He is a work behind all the confusion and calamity, working our His purposes. We place our trust in God, not in man.

(2) Pray

Secondly, we must pray, for prayer is the sure sign of trust in God. Let's not wring our hands, march in the streets or hyperventilate. Let's pray.

Why pray? Prayer engages us in the real battle behind the scenes. I believe that this is why Paul encourages us in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 –

"First of all pray for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life."

Pray for our President, pray for the generals, pray for congress, pray for our servicemen. Yes, even pray for our enemies. Jesus says, "*Pray for those who hurt you and despitefully use you.*" (Matt 5:44). Let us pray that in meting out justice life will be preserved.

Let us pray for open doors for the Good News. Paul says in Acts 17 –

"From one man God created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand which should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. His purpose in all of this was that the nations should seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him--though he is not far from any one of us." Acts 17:26-27 NLT

In times of crises and upheaval, many are open to God's truth in a way that they haven't been before. An example of this is this picture of one of our service men being baptized in the desert sands (power point slide). Let's continue to pray that God will sovereignly use this crises as a wide open door for the Good News. I also encourage our Life Groups to take time each week to pray for peace in the Gulf and for the preservation of life.

(3) Seek peace.

The Bible says, “*Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.*” Psalm 34:14. What does it mean to seek peace? Does it mean to march on the streets, protesting war? I think not. I am personally thankful for the leadership God has given our country at this time. He has blessed us with a President who doesn’t first look to the people he is leading to ask directions, but who looks to God. I personally would distrust a leader who, each morning, checks the polls and what his critics are saying before planning his actions.

In the New Testament we read, “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*” Romans 12:18. The Bible is very realistic on this point. Notice, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you...” However, I think that this is also implying that sometimes it is impossible to live at peace with someone. Have you ever met anybody like that? No matter what you did, you just couldn’t get along with them?

We all may have differing opinions on whether or not the United States and its coalition forces waited long enough before jumping into war. And yet I would think that we would all agree that much diplomacy has taken place over the last twelve years. The objective has been to pursue peace. William Temple has said, “We Christians in war are called to the hardest task of all – to fight without hatred, to resist without bitterness and in the end if God so grants it, triumph without vindictiveness.” In this same spirit Augustine wrote, “Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace.”

(4) We need to support one another.

Finally, we need to support one another. The Bible says, “*Carry each other’s burdens and fulfill the law of Christ.*” (Galatians 6:4). We don’t shut our eyes to the “collateral damage,” the moms and dads, the children, the families that will be torn apart by this war, both here and in Iraq. If you are here this morning and you have a family member or a relative in the service in Iraq, I would like you to indicate that on the communication card so that we can pray for you. I’ve already had one of our new members come up to me and volunteer to do some lawn work for any wives who might have their husbands in the military at this time. That is the kind of support Paul is talking about.

Conclusion

Our eyes are on Iraq at this time, but there is another war that is going on for the souls of men and women. It’s a war that has been raging for some time – ever since the book of Genesis. And there is another rescue operation that is going on; in fact, one that is far more important than the one in Iraq. It is to rescue men and women from eternal death.

If you have never opened your life to Christ the Bible says that you are at war with God. What you need to do is to make peace with God. And the way to do that is by trusting His Son, Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. The Bible says, “*We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” We also read in the Bible that “*If the Son sets you free, then you are free indeed.*” Free to have new meaning in life; free to forgive and to be forgiven; free from the fear

of death. Irrespective of your viewpoint on the war in Iraq, you need to take sides in relation to mankind's ongoing war with God. You need to take sides today – if you haven't already. You need to say, "I'm on God's side and I want to go with Him."

Prayer:

If you've never said "Yes" to Jesus Christ, the Bible says that you're in a war with God. You need to make your peace with Him today. You need to ask Christ to come into your life and forgive you and make you a new person. Would you say in your heart, if you haven't, "Jesus Christ, I want peace with You. I don't want to be at war with God. I want to go Your way. Come in and save me and be my Savior. Rescue me from wasting my life." Many of you have already made that decision. You're Christians. You'd say, "God, I need to be a soldier for You. I realize that there are people all around me that are dying who've never heard the Good News. Help me to share it with them, to not hoard it but to share it with others.

Lord, we do pray for peace in the Gulf. We pray that the war may be over quickly. We pray for strength and wisdom for our leaders. Help them to lead with compassion, integrity, sincerity, and wisdom. We pray for our enemies, that they may change their mind and that peace may come quickly. We pray for the families in our church and all over who are being affected by those who are in the war right now. We ask Your protection and grace and blessing on them. Help us as a church family to reach out to this community and to the base and to all who need encouragement and support during this time. In Jesus' name. Amen

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In light of today's message, how would you classify yourself...as a "crusader," as a pacifist, as one promoting nonresistance, or adhering to the "just war" theory?
2. How do you understand the approval of war in the Old Testament (cf. Deuteronomy 7:16; 20:10-18)?
3. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus seems to teach non-resistance (Matt 5:39, 44; 26:52-54). And yet Jesus (and the Bible in general) accepted war as part of the present world system (Matt 24:6; cf. Acts 10). How do we reconcile the two view-points?
4. What relation do you see between the Old Testament and the New Testament teaching on retributive justice (cf. Deut 20:10-20; Ex. 21:24; Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet 2:13-14)?
5. Review the tenets of the "just war" theory below. Which are the strongest arguments? Which are the weakest? How do they apply to the present conflict?
 - (1) *Just cause*. All aggression is condemned; only defensive war is legitimate.
 - (2) *Last resort*. War may only be waged as a last resort, after reasonable attempts to bring justice have been exhausted.
 - (3) *Public authority*. A just war can only be waged by a legitimate authority and must be officially declared by the highest authorities. People, vigilantes, terrorists do not

wage just wars; only a legitimate government is permitted to wage a war. This criteria is also sometimes called “noncombatant immunity.” Individuals not actively contributing to the conflict (i.e. POW’s and casualties as well as civilians) should be immune from attack.

- (4) *Comparative justice.* A just war can only be fought to redress wrongs that have been committed. War should not be waged unless the evils committed are grave enough to justify the taking of life. A first strike on a nation that has committed no atrocities cannot be considered justice; that’s aggression.
- (5) *Right Intention.* The only legitimate intention is to secure a just peace for all involved. Neither revenge nor conquest nor economic gain nor ideological supremacy are justified. More specifically, war is not justified if the situation in a country cannot be reasonably expected to be better after the war than before.
- (6) *Limited Objectives.* If the purpose is peace, then unconditional surrender or the destruction of a nation’s economic or political institutions is an unwarranted objective. Nations must be prohibited from using force not necessary to attain the limited objective of addressing the wrongs that have been committed.
- (7) *Proportionate Means.* The weaponry and the force used should be limited to what is needed to repel the aggression and deter future attacks. Total or unlimited war is ruled out.
- (8) *Probability of Success.* A just war can only be fought if there is a reasonable chance of success. Deaths and injury incurred in a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable. Cf. Dr. Woodrow Kroll’s article on backtothebible.org as well as Arthur F. Holmes “A Just War Response” in *War: Four Christian Views* Ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), pp 120-121.

6. What is God calling you to do in light of the present crises?

ⁱ Another example is 1 Samuel 15:2-3. "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'" Compare also Joshua 6:20-21. "When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys."

ⁱⁱ 1 Chronicles 22:8-9. Contrary to what many think, the wars fought by Israel are never called "holy wars." War is essentially evil, whether fought by Israel or by other nations.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Acts 7:45 – "Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them." In Matthew 4 Jesus cites several passages surrounding these verses in Deuteronomy in his encounter with the Tempter. He refers to this passage in Deuteronomy as the Word of God.

^{iv} See A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, and his chapter on the justice of God.

^v 1 Samuel; 18:17; 25:28. Numbers 21:14 refers to the Book of the Wars of the Lord which celebrate in song the victories that Yahweh gave Israel. The Hebrew word for "war" is found more than 300 times in the Old Testament. And in many cases war was waged by Israel at the very command of God.

^{vi} In practice, the Israelites took prisoners and would not think of killing them. The command in verse 13 to "put to the sword all the men," may mean if they still did not surrender. Cf. 2 Kings 6:22 "Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow?"

^{vii} This stands in contrast to the brutal terms of the Ammonites in 1 Samuel 11:2 "But Nahash the Ammonite replied, "I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel."

^{viii} Cf. Deuteronomy 9:5: "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you."

^{ix} John W. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), 127, n. 8.

^x The Amorites seems to be used loosely to refer to the Canaanite peoples as a whole.

^{xi} In this sense what we see of God in the New Testament doesn't contradict the Old Testament. It rather complements the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Warrior God of the Old Testament becomes himself the object of violence at the hands of sinful men and suffers on the cross. While the grace and mercy of God is revealed in the Old Testament, it is not until the cross that we see this aspect of God in its fullness. However, this progressive revelation and plan of redemption would not have happened apart from the establishment of Israel as a nation (and in the land) and the fulfillment of God's promises in the Messiah.

^{xii} Arthur F. Holmes "A Just War Response" in *War: Four Christian Views* Ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p 109.

^{xiii} Peter C. Craigie *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp 55-63.