

Bible Passages That Make You Go, “Huh?”

Struggling with texts that make inerrantists worry.

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This study will challenge the class to consider some hard facts about the Bible that are often ignored or “explained away” by contemporary Biblical interpreters. While we believe firmly that the Bible as a sacred text is inspired by God, we also believe that human beings wrote the scriptures and that sometimes their views are better represented within the texts than God’s views. The goal of this study is not to upset anyone or to challenge our belief in Jesus Christ as the Mediator of our salvation. Rather, it is an opportunity to look honestly at those more difficult parts of the Bible and do so within the Christian community. We seek to understand not only the Bible but also ourselves. It has been said that the best way to know more about yourself is to study Scripture. I would add that we do so in community because sometimes our narrow view of things can be opened up by others.

Inerrantists are those who believe that Scripture – as presented in the original texts, they say – has no flaws and perfectly reveals to us God’s will and purpose. They tend to follow a document signed in October of 1978 titled the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. At least one Lutheran, the Rev. Dr. Robert Preus, then President of Concordia Lutheran Seminary in Springfield, Illinois (later moving to Fort Wayne, Illinois), and a conservative member of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, signed it. The “doctrine” of inerrancy was among the causes of that denomination’s major split in 1976. Some today, even in the ELCA, wonder why this doctrine should cause so much upset. This study should help those who have such concerns to understand better.

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Can a Samaritan Be Good?

Ezra 4:1-3

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ²they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.” ³But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, “You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.”

Theme statement

From your reading of Scripture, does God universally love everyone or only certain people?

Exploring the Word

When we read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we are generally impressed by how thoroughly these great leaders rebuilt Judah under the reigns of the Persian kings. The people of Israel had come back to Judah after 50 years of exile and, while there were some people there who had never been deported, this interval made for daunting work. Part of the issue, for Ezra and Nehemiah, was that the Exiles, upon return, had married local, non-Jewish women and had children. They may have been fully devoted to God but their personal unions made for the possibility of compromised worship. Ezra’s solution to this was to have the Jewish men send away their wives and children – to divorce them – and to marry Jewish women. (Ezra 10:2-11). The men agreed.

Think about this for a moment. The men agreed to divorce their wives and send away their children to purify Judah! There is no indication that these women and children were, at that time, worshipping foreign gods but, just to be sure, it was better to send them away. While marriage may have been contractually different at the time of Ezra with women having few, if any, rights and children being of lesser importance to those who are grown, it is hard to imagine anyone sending their family away. The social disruption must have been enormous. And we are not told what happened to these women and children.

There are some other passages, however, in the Old Testament, that push against such an outlook. Amos 9:7 is a passage in point:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the LORD.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

Here the prophet tells us that the Israelites are not especially different from other peoples in the estimation of God. Others have been brought out of slavery and oppression as well.

Or what about the Book of Jonah? This story is deeply disturbing if you follow Ezra and Nehemiah’s logic. God has called Jonah to be the prophet who goes to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were Israel’s most hated enemy. Huge amounts of suffering had been inflicted upon

the Israelites. Jonah did not want to do his job lest the Ninevites repent, a possibility that he greatly feared. He boards a boat going in the opposite direction from Nineveh. He heads to Tarshish. First, his flight causes Gentile sailors to convert to the worship of God (Jonah 1:16). Jonah eventually heads to Nineveh, still hoping that God will destroy the city but before he has completed one third of the journey necessary to spread his message, the entire city repents, including the king. Jonah is distraught! He wanted so desperately to see Nineveh destroyed but instead repentance fills the air. The whole of the Book of Jonah calls on those of Israelite heritage to stay open to the stranger and to love foreigners.

The text for today may seem a bit strange as it may not be immediately obvious, but it seems that the “adversaries” mentioned here are Samaritans from the extinct Northern Kingdom of Israel that had many years before been destroyed, never to rise again as a nation. Still, the people there did worship God. If you remember the discussion between Jesus and the Woman at the Well (John 4:4-15), then you might get the picture. Gerizim or Jerusalem, the Prophets are included in Scripture or only the Books of Moses (the Torah), these might be questions but the truth is that these people did worship the God of Israel. Their “sin” was that they, too, had intermarried. We know that Jesus opened the door to difference and celebrated diversity. How then should we understand Ezra and Nehemiah’s resistance to intermarriage and other culturally specific issues?

Finally, remember one thing as you consider Ezra and Nehemiah’s employment. They “worked” for a foreign empire, for a foreign king. They reported to Cyrus and to Darius – two monarchs who were not Jews!

Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to great effect. The story has been domesticated by us but when we are willing to think about it, we do understand that God cares for outsiders who do God’s will and not just for those who “know the right words.” Jesus was able to use a Samaritan in his parable because the very Bible itself, in Ezra and Nehemiah, tells us to discriminate! Jesus corrects the Scripture. Something to think about, indeed.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does God love Americans more than the Chinese? Why or why not?
2. Would you be willing to send your family away in order to stay faithful to God? Does God ever require that?
3. What might Persians have thought of a “mixed-race” community? Why do you think they might have wanted their vassal state to clean up its bloodlines?
4. Should our faith include others who look, think, or act differently from us? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

Ezra and Nehemiah thought they were recording your will. They thought you were about ethnic purity but then along comes Jesus who opens the door to salvation for everybody. Teach us how to love our enemies and keep our communities safe at the same time. Amen.

Women Should Be Silent, Right?

1 Timothy 2:11-15

¹¹Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹²I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Theme statement

Women are equal to men in spite of what we read here. We understand the writer to have a different agenda.

Exploring the Word

In some Lutheran church bodies, women cannot be ordained or even, for that matter, teach Sunday School because of this text. As we have been taught that the writer's words here are inspired by God, we have a hard time wrestling with the underlying thought. The problem, of course, is that other parts of the Bible tell us something different. How are we to understand this portion of Scripture?

Scripture is Scripture and we have to accept that as it comes but it may help you to know that most scholars today do not think that Paul wrote these words. Rather, they tend to ascribe the work to his "school" of disciples. There are some problems with these letters. First, the vocabulary is different from the letters we know are from Paul, like the Letters to the Romans or Galatians. Some of his ideas are either left out entirely or changed to mean something other than was his practice. While we think of the matter today as a form of plagiarism, at the time it was considered a great honor to write in someone else's name. Much of what is found in First and Second Timothy has proved useful to the Church over the centuries and so it remains as a part of our canon. Now authorship could account for this difference but is it still authoritative for us?

It is hard to believe that Paul silenced women. After all, Paul praised women and honored them. Lydia was a seller of purple goods in Philippi and clearly the head of the congregation there (Acts 16:14ff). Phebe, Mary of Rome, Junia (who is listed as an apostle!), Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus, Julia and Chloe (Romans 16) are all praised. Euodia and Syntyche might be struggling with each other in Philippians (4:2) but they are praised for being co-workers with Paul.

And what of Jesus? In Mark's gospel it is only the women who come to the tomb, "damning the torpedoes" of the fear that the disciples felt. In Matthew's gospel the women come from the tomb and preach to the disciples. In Luke's gospel, the disciples think that these women are just idly nattering on. Though most importantly, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is clearly the first and most important disciple. She is extolled for her faith. And in John, Mary Magdalene meets the risen Christ and tells his disciples. Women are extolled. Women's persistence and extravagance are praised. Jesus clearly had a high view of women.

It is possible that the author of First Timothy was writing to a particularly obstreperous group where women were in leadership and fighting with each other. That is one interpretation. It may also be that a very patriarchal culture – the culture of the Roman Empire and its "colonies" - was reasserting itself here. After all, for many centuries the church ignored the position of women in Paul and Jesus'

estimation and reimposed a more patriarchal vision. Perhaps this text from First Timothy was among the first salvos in that fight.

Women, in ancient Israel, could not inherit property. This is particularly why the prophets and Jesus made care for the widow and orphan so important. Women were unprotected. In ancient society, Levirate marriage became a way of protecting women while maintaining patriarchy. Levirate marriage was instituted to protect women. The oldest brother of a deceased husband would have the duty to sleep with the widow and produce an heir. The heir would not inherit from the brother but from the deceased husband as a way of providing for both the child and the widow. This was such an important function that Matthew mentions Tamar in his genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:3). You can read her story in Genesis 38. Or you could read the story of how the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with the woman who may have married seven times to seven brothers in succession in Matthew 22:23-28, Mark 12:18-23 and Luke 20:27-33.

In Jesus' vision of the new world, women speak for themselves. Women give extravagant gifts and are remembered for it. Women come to the tomb and are the first to believe. More importantly, women followed Jesus. Luke records for us in chapter 8 the following:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Here is a little-known fact: Christian wedding services differed from Jewish and Gentile services in one important area: when the promises came, women made them, too. A woman had to agree to the match. Before this, women had no say in the matter. It was a small but important change.

One more thought: according to First Timothy, chapter 2, women are saved through childbirth. The question then arises, are women who do not become mothers saved? This text, even if we take it 'literally,' cannot help us with the place of women in the Christian Church.

Questions for Discussion

1. If God inspires a person, how much of their humanity is left?
2. What role does Scripture have in our lives if some of the details might be wrong?
3. Jesus and Paul liberated women in surprising ways. How do we liberate women today?
4. Think about women as disciples of Jesus. What difference does it make to know that Jesus had women among his followers?
5. When you think about how incrementally the people of Scripture tried to liberate women, what still needs to be done today?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, you set Mary as our example in faith, making her a disciple of the first order. You created men and women as both in your image. Help us today to value each other fully, to remember your loving kindness towards women in all that Jesus did and to find ways today to value women in how we respond to your Word in faith. Amen.

Does God Encourage Lies?

1 Kings 22:19-23

Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. ²⁰And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ Then one said one thing, and another said another, ²¹until a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ ²²‘How?’ the LORD asked him. He replied, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then the LORD said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.’ ²³So you see, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has decreed disaster for you.”

Theme statement

We do not believe God lies or encourages lies. We would prefer Jesus’ statement that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. This portion of Scripture claims God has or does lie.

Exploring the Word

We should tell the larger story, before we tackle this passage. King Ahab of the Kingdom of Israel (the northern kingdom) and King Jehoshaphat, King of Judah (or the southern kingdom) had decided to fight the Arameans together. Ahab was ready to go but Jehoshaphat was unsure. He had heard all of King Ahab’s court prophets predict victory for the two but Jehoshaphat wanted an independent opinion; one he could trust. To that end, King Ahab turns to Micaiah, a prophet who had always spoken against Ahab. At first, Micaiah suggested that Ahab would win but he said so sarcastically and Ahab understood the sarcasm. Finally, Micaiah gave the prophesy that is our text today.

One should note that Micaiah was famous in the Kingdom of Israel for always speaking poorly of Ahab. Ahab was an evil king and we know this from other stories about him and his wife, Jezebel. He stole Naboth’s vineyard and his prophets had a contest with Elijah. This is the same man we know about from other sources. God clearly wanted him gone.

Yet in this story, we have a problem. God is sitting in his heavenly council. He wants Ahab gone and has a plan to see that it happens. Ahab just needs to lead his army into battle and God will allow him to be killed. How, then, do we get Ahab to commit to this war? A spirit, a member of the heavenly council, agrees to deceive Ahab and get him to the battle where he will die. God is happy with that plan and it proceeds.

Perhaps the author was not thinking about how God might appear in this story. Micaiah is known for telling the truth and the author wants us to know that Micaiah is a true prophet, a truth-teller without compromise. Yet, in telling the truth, Micaiah suggests that God encourages lies. I suspect that this was not the intent but it is the effect. An evil king may be gone but does God deal in lies?

In John’s gospel we hear a lot about truth. In Chapter 8, “Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” These people are clearly disturbed by such a statement but focus on freedom rather than truth. Later Pontius Pilate asks Jesus directly, “What is truth?” though one wonders if he was truly interested. The implication, of course, is that Pilate had the “truth” standing before him and failed to recognize it.

The test of truth for all of us is this: does it save, does it produce righteousness for God's people. In our portion today, the spirit of deceit got rid of an evil king and that was a positive thing for God's people. Today we might want to think about God's character and so rethink whether or not God encourages lying.

God's Word for Today

During World War II, the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon saved approximately 3,000 Jews from extermination. The villagers were members of the Reformed Church, an unusual fact in the mostly Roman Catholic France. Two things and a good amount of luck (God's grace) made this happen. We know that the Reformed Church in France is also known as the Huguenots. These people had understood deep in their bones what it meant to be persecuted. Their ancestors were killed and imprisoned for their faith. So these folk cared for refugees without question. It was part of their DNA.

Second, the church in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon had a pastor who was a pacifist (not a popular undertaking in those days). He organized the village to care for those who were persecuted and so these folks did so with abandon.

I say that "luck" played a role for two reasons. First, Vichy, the capital of the southern part of France that collaborated with Nazi Germany, was only a few miles away and yet the village was not raided. Second, Pastor Trocmé, our pacifist, preached regularly about the evils of lying and people therefore valued the truth. No one was ever asked! People have wondered, however, if these two "goods" – the care for Jewish refugees and the importance of telling the truth – were ever tested against each other, which would win? Truth may ultimately be loving another so deeply that you risk everything for them, even your own honesty. One hopes, however, that should that happen, people would confess their failure to uphold the truth even as they celebrate the freedom of those oppressed.

Does God encourage lies? No one can imagine that. Scripture may be wrong about that encouragement but right when it concludes that God does protect people.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is this the first time you have heard this story? What strikes you most about it?
2. God certainly can do as God pleases but how do we trust that God is a reliable figure if he encourages lies?
3. Micaiah prophesies the truth in spite of Ahab's desire to hear a lie. How do we hear truth today?
4. If you lived life truthfully always, what effect do you think that might have on people?
5. If helping someone were against the law, would you break it?

Closing Prayer

God of Truth, you call us always to speak the truth, especially before potentates and the powerful. We hope our words always honor you. When the truth and love collide, help us to choose wisely and err on the side of grace always. Amen.

Does God Command Us To Sacrifice Children?

Ezekiel 20:18-26

I said to their children in the wilderness, Do not follow the statutes of your parents, nor observe their ordinances, nor defile yourselves with their idols. ¹⁹I the LORD am your God; follow my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances, ²⁰and hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, so that you may know that I the LORD am your God. ²¹But the children rebelled against me; they did not follow my statutes, and were not careful to observe my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live; they profaned my sabbaths.

Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. ²²But I withheld my hand, and acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. ²³Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, ²⁴because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their ancestors' idols. ²⁵*Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live.* ²⁶*I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD.*

Theme statement

Does (or did) God require the sacrifice of children? If we read only the Old Testament, the answer is yes.

Exploring the Word

Read the text printed above carefully and pay special attention to the words which I have put in italics. Ezekiel affirms that child sacrifice to the Lord was a part of Israelite worship. What Ezekiel says, however, is that God had tricked them into doing it so that they would know that God was God, not that God wants child sacrifice. In the prophet Micah we read a somewhat more soothing call for us to be honest and just people but if you read the famous passage below carefully, you might be a little surprised:

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*
⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

While the whole passage calls on the faithful to be just, kind and humble it does not actually condemn child sacrifice! Indeed, it might just be saying something fairly simple: be better people, do not just make sacrifices but change your lives.

In Exodus a law was given that is truly difficult to read. Child sacrifice was commanded by God!

You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. *The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.* (Exodus 22:29, my emphasis)

There are other stories where it seems that God approves of or welcomes the sacrifice of children. In Judges 11:29-40 Jephthah makes a vow to God that he later regrets. He is about to fight the Ammonites and vows to God that whoever comes out from his house to greet him after his victory he will sacrifice. It turns out that it is his own, beloved daughter. He keeps his promise.

Sometimes the person making the promise is not an Israelite. In 2 Kings 3, King Mesha of the Moabites sacrifices his own son to gain a victory over the Israelites. The point being, of course, that child sacrifice is powerful and that the gods - or God - respect it!

When Jesus is born, in Luke's gospel, Jesus is redeemed at the Temple for two turtle doves. Already the practice of child sacrifice had ceased and was replaced by a substitution. We know, too, that the practice of child sacrifice became abhorrent to good Jews. Jesus speaks about the valley of Gehenna as a synonym for hell. That valley had become a garbage pit for Jerusalem and still today it is a place not built upon. It was similar to hell because it was always burning as refuse will eventually spontaneously ignite. What truly made it hell, however, was that people there would sacrifice their children to the god Molech (Jeremiah 32:35). Today, good Jews believe that life is sacred and can never be sacrificed. Good Christians believe this, too. Sometimes we believe things that are contrary to Scripture!

How we talk about Jesus' death on the Cross can also be viewed here. If Christians do not believe that God requires a child to die for our or anyone else's sins, then how do we make sense of Jesus' death for us? There are seven known theories of the atonement. I say "theories" because each has merit and each has problems. When we speak about what Christ has done for us, we ought to be careful not to say that God requires us to sacrifice either ourselves or our children but that Jesus has redeemed us. We do not want God to sound blood-thirsty!

God's Word for Today

It is common for many of us, at the death of a child, to want to find words of comfort for the parents. Often, we use words we have heard and think might be pleasant to repeat but, if you think about them, they are probably not helpful. For example, when a child dies, a Christian might say, "God needed another angel in heaven." That makes God out to be cruel to the parents even when the intent was good. Children are one of the supreme gifts of God so comments like "Everything happens for a reason" can seem dismissive or "Your child is in a better place," which suggests that the best place for that child is not in the arms of his or her parents. Better either to say, "I am so sorry this happened," or "I am here for you if there is something you need." If you want to add something from your faith, perhaps you can say, "I may not know how you feel, but God does." God never longs for or looks at the death of another. Death is always the enemy but God, in Christ, has conquered death and of that we can all be assured.

Questions for discussion

1. Did you know before this class that there were passages in the Old Testament that commanded the sacrifice of children? How does that make you feel?
2. Why do you think that there was a time when people thought that God (and the gods) had some interest in having a child sacrificed to them?
3. How might we be willing to sacrifice children to a god or God today? Are there any ideas or idols that captivate us so today? What are they?
4. We know that one way the people of faith dealt with these commands was to find substitutions for them, as we see in Luke. Can you think of other things for which we have made substitutions?
5. Have you had the experience of losing a child? What was the most comforting thing someone said to you?

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, we have sometimes cared so much about winning – a war, a battle, or just an argument – that we do not consider the cost to our families, especially our children. Help us to remember that you love us all, from the greatest to the least and that your son gave preference of place to children. Amen.

Does God Command Genocide?

Deuteronomy 7:1-6

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—²and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. ³Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. ⁵But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. ⁶For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

Theme statement

As the Israelites were being given the Promised Land of Canaan for their own, God commanded them to “show no mercy” to those who inhabited the place. This does not square with the God we know in Jesus Christ.

Exploring the Word

The command of God to the Israelites to kill not only the combatants but women, children and even the domestic animals as well, is a problem for us who read the Scriptures through the lens of the Cross of Jesus Christ. This is a God we have trouble recognizing. Throughout history there have been attempts made by various individuals and groups to explain this disturbing idea away. One of the oldest examiners of the Old Testament was a scholar and Biblical expert named Origen (circa 185 AD - circa 253 AD). In his work, *Contra Celsum*, (7:19) he says “As for the command given to the Jews to slay their enemies, it may be answered that anyone who looks carefully into the meaning of the passage will find that it is impossible to interpret literally.” One hundred years later, another great theologian of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa (circa 335 AD-circa 394 AD) concludes that the only possibility when reading such violent stories like the conquest of Canaan described in the Book of Joshua is to read them allegorically. That means not to take them literally but to say that they describe the battle of the Christian against evil in general.

You could counter that in the Book of Deuteronomy we read this particular command: “Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.” (24:16). Yet in the story of the Ten Plagues visited by Moses upon the Pharaoh of Egypt, the Tenth Plague is the death of all the first born of Egypt, including infants and his son! Or much later, in Isaiah we read:

Whoever is found will be thrust through,
and whoever is caught will fall by the sword.
¹⁶*Their infants will be dashed to pieces
before their eyes;*
their houses will be plundered,
and their wives ravished.
¹⁷See, I am stirring up the Medes against them,
who have no regard for silver
and do not delight in gold.
¹⁸Their bows will slaughter the young men;
they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb;
their eyes will not pity children.
¹⁹And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,
the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah
when God overthrew them. (13:15-19, italics added)

Some will tell you that the Egyptians mentioned above or the Canaanites who inhabited the land were particularly evil and God wanted to punish them. If this were true, then why didn't God send Abraham to Canaan in the same way that God sent Jonah to the Ninevites? Perhaps one might believe that a group of people must be fully deserving of punishment. That was seemingly true of the Amorites in Genesis 15. God gave them another four generations before he allowed them to be slaughtered. Yet one might ask when did infants and children become so evil that they deserved slaughter? Our doctrine of original sin which states that everyone is born alienated from God could be invoked but then everybody should be under the same condemnation!

Or is it just the acquisition of land that is at stake? If you read Deuteronomy 20:10-18 it is clear that if the land outside of Canaan be conquered, one may take women and children as part of the booty but land inside of Canaan that is conquered must have with it the women, children and livestock killed as well. Land seems to be an issue! Where someone lives might determine their lives after conquest.

We could argue, and some do, that we cannot judge now the actions of those thousands of years ago who did not have the same moral standards that we do. It was common, not only for Israel but also for non-Jewish nations, to commit genocide in their wars. We should not be so hard on them today, so the argument goes. That is a problematic position, however. We can today judge the actions of our forebears in the faith as problematic lest we ever think it justified today.

So how should we read these difficult stories? First, I think we need to be honest. They are there – they are embarrassingly there! We begin by acknowledging them. Second, we know that Jesus is God's perfect revelation of what it means to be human. The one who said that we should "turn the other cheek," (Matt. 5:39) could not have also commanded us to kill everyone we (or He) doesn't like. We know, too, that human beings have written all of this down for our benefit but these same human beings make mistakes. Finally, we can read the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Scriptures can read us. If we find ourselves agreeing with a text like the one assigned for today, it says more about our understanding than it does about God. We follow Jesus and sometimes that is very, very difficult. Killing off people we don't like might be the coward's way out.

Questions for discussion

1. If God ordered the killing of all the Canaanites in places like Deuteronomy 7, why should we believe that killing off six million Jews during the Second World War was not also commanded by God?
2. It might be helpful, as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa suggest, to read these stories as allegories. What advantages can you see to that and what problems?
3. The doctrine of original sin teaches that all of us are born with a propensity toward evil. How might that justify the killing of children?
4. Jesus changed scripture (Matthew 5:21-28). How should we read those parts of the Bible that are at odds with who we know God to be in Jesus Christ?

Closing prayer

Lord, we would follow Jesus. Help us always to read your holy Word with the eyes of faith in Him who gave his life for us. Help us not to judge those who came before but see in what they wrote a possibility to do and be better. Amen.

Youth Activities for Bible Passages That Make You Go, “Huh?”

Adapted by Deacon Deborah Poole
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Reverse Role Play

Objective: Teach students to think about responding to hate with love.

- Create different scenarios where one person treats another person unkindly (e.g., someone making fun of another, someone stealing someone’s seat, etc.).
- Have students role play how they might naturally want to respond, like being rude back or ignoring the person.
- Now, reverse the roles and challenge them to act out how they could respond in love (e.g., with kindness, patience, or offering to help).
- Debrief: After each role play, discuss how responding with love changes the situation. Encourage students to think of real-life ways they can respond to hurt with grace.

Let’s Play Jeopardy

- Set up the space as you need and break the students into different groups (around 5 students per group but can change depending on size).
- You can find a template for Women Of The Bible Jeopardy Template.
- After each answer, take time to discuss why these women are important and why they might be included. If youth don’t know who they are, spend some time looking up some information about them.

Two Truths, a Lie and a Wish

Instructions:

- Think of three statements about yourself that you’ll share with the group. One has to be true, one has to be a lie, and one has to be a wish – something you WISH were true, but it isn’t (at least not yet) – the more unique or interesting the statements, the better.
- Be strategic! If two of your statements are negative – “I accidentally swallowed a whole frog, I forgot to wear pants to school one day” – and only one is positive, we’ll know what your WISH is. Unless adding “ribbit” to your normal speech is a wish.
- One at a time, you’ll share your three statements with the group.
- The group will vote on which statements were the truth, the lie, and the wish.
- You’ll share which statement was the lie and let us know if we were right.

Nothing Will Separate Us From God

You'll need: hearts and Sharpies and tape.

Instructions:

- Choose one of the words that stuck out to you or even just write a thought to God about the love that He has for you.
- Then, come and get a heart and write your thoughts on the heart and tape it to the wall around us.
- When everyone has had a chance to write on their heart and tape it around the room, say:
- You are surrounded by love in this room.
- Maybe you have never really experienced the love of God.
- Maybe you still worry that you aren't worthy of His love.
- But, please listen to these words: God loves you. And NOTHING can separate you from His love.
- Spend some time just trying to wrap your brain and heart around that because it is huge.
- God thinks that you are pretty amazing! He loves you.
- As you leave, walk around the room and read the hearts and take the scripture we read with you. Whether or not you feel the love of God.... His love is real and it is yours.
- He loves you.
- And nothing, not even your doubt, can separate you from his love.

A Spiritual Practice

Have everyone spread out to find a comfortable place to sit where they can still hear the voice of the person guiding the practice. Say:

- Begin by centering yourself in this present moment. Let go of all the racing thoughts and worries you have about everything going on in your busy life. Be here. (pause for silent reflection)
- Now recall the welcoming attitude of Jesus. Think of the way he sees those whom other religious figures have judged as evil or wrong. The way he looks at a prostitute and sees something good in her. The way he looks at a tax collector and sees something good in him. The way he prays that his crucifiers might be forgiven. Jesus looks at these people and sees past their sinful ways. He sees each of them as a beloved child of God. (pause for silent reflection)
- Now recall someone who you do not like. Someone with whom you disagree, or think is evil. Someone who has wronged you or hurt you. Someone you might call your "enemy." (pause for silent reflection)
- Pause and consider how you are feeling as you remember this person right now. Where is the tenseness in your body? Is your stomach feeling queasy? Is your back tight? How clenched is your jaw? Take a deep breath in, and a deep breath out.
- These emotions are real. If you are feeling anxious, angry, or sad, sit there. Stay with them. These emotions are real, and they come from a place of deep being.
- Jesus may love your enemy. Jesus might interact with your enemy with a sense of compassion and connection. If this resonates for you, I invite you to lean into that image, ponder over it. If this makes you more upset, then stop. Turn away from that image. Return to breathing in and breathing out. (Pause.)

- Forgiveness takes time. When our spirits are not ready, pushing such a practice has been shown to be ineffective, and can actually do great harm. If you feel inner anxiety around forgiveness, that's okay. Return to a place of inner safety. Breathe in, breathe out. The Spirit is breath, and is life, and will fill your body with what you need to live right now. Not back when you were wronged, not in the future, but right now, in this safe place.
- Know that Jesus did not ignore sin or evil behavior. When horrible things happen, Jesus does not turn a blind eye to such things. Seeing through the eyes of Jesus does not mean disregarding sin; it means recognizing that we are called to transformation, and transformation at our own pace. Each child of God is defined by the love of God that created them; that includes you. Yes, you. By loving yourself for who you were created to be rather than hating and judging your feelings, or your path toward forgiveness, you remember the inner gift from God: the gift of compassion. (pause for silent reflection)
- Amen.

