

STUMBLINGBLOCK OR STEPPING STONE?

Tonight, I want to take a look at something that has troubled many a heart. In fact, for a number of people, it is something that has caused them to not believe in the God of the Bible, nor in the Bible of God. I want to look at the matter of God ordering the killing of innocent children.

I realize that this may not be a problem to most of you. Your faith and walk with God has led you to be able to completely trust God, even in things like this that are hard to explain. Even so, I would imagine some of you would like to understand this better and maybe be able to provide a better explanation if and when the subject ever comes up.

What are we supposed to think and believe, and how are we supposed to feel when we read in the Bible that God ordered the killing of innocent children? I mean, this is the same God who gave to Israel a law, and in that law, He said, "You shall not kill," or as some versions have it, "You shall not murder." In those occasions when God commanded the Israelites to utterly destroy every living thing, was he commanding his people to do something that he had commanded them to not do?

There are a number of instances where God commanded his people to kill other people. Just a few weeks ago we looked at the story found in the 15th chapter of Numbers, where a man went out on the Sabbath day picking up sticks. The man was seized by his fellow Israelites and brought to Moses to see what punishment should be meted out to him. We observed that this was clearly a case of one sinning intentionally, or with a high hand, as it is called in the ESV and ASV, "presumptuously" in the KJV, or "defiantly" in the NASV. Verse 35 said, "*The Lord said to Moses 'The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.'*" The man was put to death because he despised the Lord's word and broke one of his commands.

Some of the other things for which people might be put to death, included:

- Committing adultery, Lev. 20:10
- Cursing your mother or father, Exodus 21:17 (same for striking their mother or father)
- Bestiality was punishable by death, Exodus 21:19
- Doing any work on the Sabbath Day was a capital offense, Exo. 31:14
- Offering your child as a sacrifice to idol-God Molech, Lev 20:2
- Homosexual acts, Lev. 20:13
- Blaspheming the name of God, Lev. 24:16
- Coming too close to the Tabernacle when it was being put up or taken down, Num. 1:51
- Deut. 13:5, False prophets

Now, the thing is, we sometimes read those passages and do not give it a whole lot of thought, but we are shocked when we learn that Sharia law which many Muslims live by calls for similar

acts of capital punishment. Now, I'm not saying the two are morally equal, but I want you to be able to see why some people are deeply troubled by some of the things found in the Bible.

But my purpose this evening is not to generally discuss the matter of putting people to death, but to look at the specific case of where innocent children died, and did so at the hand or command of the Lord.

For example, we have the case of God ordering the killing of the people of Amalek, in 1 Samuel 15. There is a background story that is found in Exodus 17. You may recall that the Israelites on their way out of Egypt, came to a place called Rephidim, looking for water. There was no water, the springs or pools no longer had any water to offer the people. That is the place where God told Moses to strike the rock and when he did, water came forth and people had water to drink and provide for their livestock. But while there, they were attacked by the Amalekites, and for a while it looked like the Israelites might be defeated. But as long as Moses held out his arms, the Israelites prevailed, and so two of Moses' lieutenants held up his arms, one under each arm, and Israel prevailed. At that time, however, God promised that the day would come when he would utterly wipe out the memory of Amalek.

So in the days of Israel's first king, King Saul, God sent word to him that he was to go and make that happen. Look at **verse 3 of 1 Samuel 15**.

Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

Now, we will come back to that passage in a little bit, but there were many other cases similar to that one. For example, back in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 2, Moses is recounting some of the experiences that the Israelites had in coming to that point, after almost 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. In verses 26 he talks about what happened when they wanted to pass through the land controlled by a king named Sihon. Moses offered to pay for the pasture and water that would be used, but Sihon refused. And then Sihon marshaled an army and came out against him. In **verse 33**, Moses writes, *"And the Lord our God gave him over to us, and we defeated him and his sons and all his people. And we captured all his cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children. We left no survivors."*

Over in the 7th chapter of the book of Joshua, when the Israelites had finally passed over the Jordan river, and were preparing to advance against their first foe, the people of Jericho, in verses 16 & 17, we read:

Joshua said to the people, 'Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction.' Dropping down to **verse 21**, we read: *"Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword."* In **chapter 10** of Joshua, we read about another town called Makkedah, who made the mistake of hiding the five Amorite kings in a nearby cave. They had attacked Joshua and the Israelites. **Verse 28** says, *"As for Makkedah,*

Joshua captured it on that day and struck it, and its king, with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah just as he had done to the king of Jericho.” In **chapter 11** you read about the destruction of Hazor. **Verse 11** says, *“And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction; there was none left that breathed.”*

And we could go on and cite many other examples wherein everyone in a town or city was put to death, men, women and children.

Well, how are we to understand this, when it certainly looks like a lot of innocent people were killed at the direction of God who had commanded the Israelites not to kill, or murder?

Well, there have been several ways that people have tried to explain this. There are some who go to a foolish extreme of talking about the God of the OT, and the God of the NT. The God of the OT, they say was full of vengeance and wrath. The God of the NT is a God of love and mercy. Well, of course, that explanation really doesn't work, because there weren't two Gods. Both testaments are very clear, there is one God, and furthermore, speaking through the prophet **Malachi, in 3:6** God says, *“For I the LORD do not change.”* And **James 1:17** says, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”*

Others have tried to soften the idea of the killing of the innocent children of these occasions as a kind of “mercy killing.” *“After all,”* they say, *“those children died as innocents and will live forever with God and all the saints.”* And there is something certainly to be said for that! Furthermore, they might add, *“what were they to do, after all, all of the mothers and fathers were dead? Those children would die anyway and it might be a much more horrible death.”* Well one might argue that way, but somehow, it seems like an all-wise and all-powerful God could have figured out some other way.

Some have tried to explain the matter this way: God was simply preventing more wars and bloodshed. It is sort of like our justification for dropping the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By taking that drastic step, it would put fear in the hearts of all the other people, and furthermore, you wouldn't have continuing generations of people growing up seeking vengeance. And of course we do know that because the Israelites did fail to rid the land of all the Canaanites, that they had warfare and trouble all of their history.

Other folks might want to point out that, hey, God is God. He can do what He pleases. And that is true, isn't it? He is the potter, we are the clay. In **Romans 9:20-22**, Paul writes:

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” 21) Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? 22) What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,

Certainly from one perspective, we sinful human beings are not in much of a position to sit in judgment of God. And yet, from another perspective, we are not trying to do that. Rather we are trying to understand why He apparently did, and for all we know, may still be doing, what He forbids us from doing? We are trying to understand, that if this book is inspired by God, and God is holy, and just, how could he order the killing of innocent children? We think of what Herod did in the days when Jesus was born as a heinous crime. So how can we continue to love and worship and praise a God who seems to have a long history of doing that?

I realize that may sound like an audacious question, but I'm telling you, there are lots of people who are asking questions like that, and not getting an answer that satisfies, they turn away from seeking after God. Now I realize that they do that to their own harm, but can we not offer them something at least a little more helpful? I hope we can, and that is what I want to try to do in the time I have remaining tonight.

First of all I want to begin by reminding people that all life, including human life, including the life of every innocent child, is a gift from the omnipotent and omniscient God. It is His to give and it is His to take away. That's why we are not supposed to be taking that matter into our own hands. The only life takers are to be those whom God has authorized. And you have to understand, He doesn't just authorize the taking of human life in a haphazard fashion. Romans 13 makes it clear that God authorizes governments and rulers to wield the sword. Well, when they do that, sometimes people are going to die, and sometimes those that die are innocent. Furthermore, those whom God tells to strike and to kill are authorized to take the life of others. And there again, in many of those cases, there were innocent children who suffered and were also killed. Keep in mind, however, that God moves in a mysterious way, and He knows what he is doing. There are things that He knows, better than we ever could, that makes whatever decision he makes, or action he calls for, in every situation to precisely be that which best demonstrates His holy and just, and loving and gracious purpose. He doesn't have to explain every decision to us. We probably couldn't understand it if He did. He doesn't have to justify His every action to us. He does ask us to trust him that he knows what He is doing.

Think with me for just a moment and let me illustrate what I have just been trying to say. Do you remember the story concerning Noah and Ark? Of course you remember it, probably everyone has heard that story, whether they are believers or not. But do you remember why God decided to destroy the world? **Genesis 6:5** says, "*The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*" Do you suppose there were any little children living at that time; any babes at their mother's breasts; little children running around playing in the dirt? Do you suppose there were any innocent children at that time? There had to be, right! Now, for their sake—for the sake of those innocent children, was that a gracious call on God's part? Absolutely! Given what He was seeing, and given what his omniscience told him would happen if he did not intervene, that decision was absolutely gracious! It was absolutely just to punish the wicked, but it was also absolutely gracious for him to reclaim those innocent lives that he had given in the first

place. Life is a gift from God, and it is His to give, and it is His to take away or to bring it back to himself.

Now, with that thought in mind, building on the premise that God is both omnipotent and omniscient, I want you to see something else.

So many times people are like Job. They don't understand, they haven't got a clue about what God knows or what God is doing, but they feel like they have a right to rake Him over the coals for it. That's what Job thought isn't it? He thought, *"Boy, I don't deserve all of this! Somebody up there got their signals crossed. I'm being treated like a total heathen, and here I've lived all of my life trying hard to please God in every way. I wish He would give me about three minutes, I would get the record set straight!"* And finally God gives Job his three minutes, and Job sees whatever he saw in that conversation with God, and do you remember what he said? He said, "I think I will be quiet!" Read the last few chapters of that book, will you, and take a lesson from Job.

Oh, there's so much that we don't know, but did you notice, when I was sharing with you from the story of the Amalekites, and the people of Sihon, and the people of Jericho, and Makkedah and Hazor, and all of those other places as well, that in each case it says the people were "devoted" to destruction. The word devoted there doesn't just mean they were singled out for destruction. No, no. It meant something very different, and that difference makes a big difference in how we should view all of these situations.

Do you remember what I read a little while ago from Paul's words in Romans 9? In **verse 22**, Paul asked, *"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction."* We need to keep in mind that *"the soul that sins, it shall die,"* (Ezekiel 18:20). *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). God told Adam and Eve that in the day they ate of that tree, they would die. They didn't die—at least not physically, so did God make a mistake, or did He show mercy?

Well keep that in mind and go with me again to the Old Testament story of Abraham, and to the 15th chapter of Genesis where God for at least the third time makes a promise to Abraham that the land in which he was then dwelling would belong to his descendants one day. Read with me, if you will from verses 13-16:

Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14) But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15) As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16) And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

What am I getting at? Well, what was God saying to Abram about the people of that land? He was saying they were wicked. They were wicked and getting worse. God was saying that the time was going to come when he would no longer put up with their wickedness; that his judgment and wrath would have to come. And so, in God's judgment, these people were marked for destruction, in exactly the same way that the world in the days of Noah was marked for destruction. And so, when Moses and Joshua brought the people into the land, when they got even as close as where the Amorites such as king Sihon dwelled, these were a people who were to be devoted to destruction. That word devoted, signified "that which belonged to God."

Go back to **Joshua 6:17, 18** for example. Joshua said to the people,

"And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. 18) But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it."

Have you ever wondered why God didn't just let Moses and the Israelites finish the job on the Amalekites back at Rephidim? Why did he wait four or five hundred years? Well, I don't know but I do know this—turn to **1 Samuel 15 and look at verse 3**. In the KJV you will see the word, "utterly." That doesn't mean completely, it's the word that is translated in other places as "devoted." The ESV renders that, "*Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.*"

What God was saying, after being very, very patient with the Amalekites, is that he had had enough. Their wickedness was now complete, and it was time for his wrath and judgment to fall upon them. He had marked them for destruction, but in that destruction, were some, who were innocent. Now, for their sake—for the sake of those innocent children, was that a gracious call on God's part? Absolutely! Given what He was seeing, and given what his omniscience told him would happen if he did not intervene, that decision was absolutely justified but it was also absolutely gracious! It was certainly just to punish the wicked, but it was also gracious to reclaim those innocent lives that he had given in the first place. Life is a gift from God, and it is His to give, and it is His to take away or to bring it back to himself.

I truly hope this lesson has been helpful, and if nothing else, I hope that it dispels any thought that God ever has been or ever could be anything but fair, and merciful, and gracious to each and every soul. We would all agree that God has the right, in fact he has a moral obligation to punish those who choose to live every way except His way, and who in so doing, make the world a more and more perverse and wicked place to live. So when God decides that it is time to bring to an end this world and universe as we know it, do you understand, that is His call? But don't you know when that time comes, there will be innocent children found all over this world. And God will be absolutely justified in making that call, and at least for the sake of those little children who are, as we say, innocent, it will absolutely be a gracious call.

Let us close with this reminder from the Lord himself found in Matthew 19:14. The disciples had been trying to discourage people from bringing their children to Jesus, but Jesus said, "*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.*"