

Week 34

Contemporary Issues: How to Handle Problem Passages

Key Verses

Isaiah 55:8-9 For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. ⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.

+ Introduction

Imagine a 16-year-old coming to a crisis point in his life. He is having trouble with friends, he is struggling in his relationship with his parents, and he is in a general state of confusion about his life. Seeking clarity and answers, he decides to go to the Bible. He says, "God, if you have any answers for what I need to do right now, then please show them to me!" The boy opens his Bible to a random page looking for inspiration and encouragement, and he reads this in 2 Kings 2:23-24 *"From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!"²⁴ He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys."* The boy cries out, "I promise I will never make fun of a bald person again! But what does that have to do with my life!"

Many of us at one time or another have experienced the confusion of coming to a strange Bible passage. Beyond that, many sections of the Old Testament might cause inner turmoil due to their violent and strange nature. When we come across "problem passages" in the Bible, we do not have to ignore them or disavow them. Instead, it is helpful to humbly seek understanding of why these stories and passages have made their way into God's Word. In this lesson, we are going to look at some of the most morally troubling passages in Scripture and try to understand them.

It is worth remembering that the Bible gives us an opportunity to struggle and wrestle with the deepest and most difficult questions of human nature, suffering, and our relationship with God. In fact, the new name that God gives to Jacob, Israel, means "one who wrestles with God." The entire history of the nation of Israel shows us what it means to wrestle and contend with God's

activity in the world. We are invited to do the same thing every time we read from God's Word and ponder the nature of what it means to know and follow Him.

For this lesson, we are going to go over a few key principles that we can apply when we come across difficult passages. After reviewing these principles, we will apply them to a few of the most difficult passages in the Bible.

+ Key Principles

1. Know the Big Story

When you are reading any passage or section from the Bible, it is imperative that you understand the big story of Scripture. Context is key. Then you can figure out where to place each individual story within the big story. One example of this would be understanding how to place Jesus within His context. Jesus was born in a specific time and in a specific place (first century Israel) in a specific context (The Jews in Israel were under the rule of the Roman Empire). Jesus was not a spiritual guru spouting general moral teachings about the universe. He was teaching to a specific audience of mostly Jews and some Gentiles within a context that they could understand. Knowing the history of Israel and Rome allows us to understand Jesus' parables and His life experiences. If you do not know the big story of the Bible, it is difficult to grasp the magnitude of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Jesus' words at the Last Supper during Passover, Jesus' illustrations about sheep and shepherds, Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees, or hundreds of other crucial elements from Jesus' life. We must start by understanding the big story of creation, fall, forgiveness, and redemption.

2. Know the Immediate Context

Beyond the big context of the Bible, we also need to understand the immediate context of each individual story and passage so that we can understand difficult passages. Many 'bumper-sticker' Bible verses like Philippians 4:13 or Jeremiah 29:11 are misunderstood precisely because they are removed from their context, though inspiring and motivational.

When the apostle Paul says, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*" he is not saying that he can accomplish incredible feats of strength, speed, and success through Jesus. Paul is not like the athlete who wears Philippians 4:13 on their jersey because Jesus will give them the power to win their sporting event. Instead, Paul says that he knows how to live with plenty or live in suffering with nothing because Christ strengthens him.

Look below at the verse before and after Philippians 4:13:

PHILIPPIANS 4:12-14 *I know how to get along with little, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.¹⁴ Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my difficulty.*

Likewise, when Jeremiah writes "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,'" he is not making an outright statement that God always has great plans for our future. In fact, Jeremiah was writing this to the elders of Israel who were exiled as prisoners in a foreign land, and they would remain there for decades to come. Look at the verse immediately preceding Jeremiah 29:11

JEREMIAH 29:10-11 *"For this is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.' ¹¹ 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'*

When we separate verses and paragraphs from their immediate context, we can distort their meaning and misunderstand them as a result. It does not mean they cannot be encouraging and motivating, but we miss the deeper meaning when we neglect the context of Scripture.

3. Remember God's Purposes

When we encounter a difficult passage, we must consider God's stated purposes in a given situation. With any Biblical passage, we must think through what God is doing in that particular time and in that particular place.

In many passages of Scripture, God's purposes are revealed to us and provide a window into what He is doing in the world. Consider Ephesians 1:15-19a:

EPHESIANS 1:15-19A *For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the boundless greatness of His power toward us who believe.*

The word "revelation" in Greek is the word, "Apokalupsis" which means, "unveiling, laying bare or naked." ¹ Paul is praying that believers would be able to experience the unveiling of knowledge and understanding of God.

Yet sometimes, the big picture of God's purpose is completely beyond our ability to understand. Consider Isaiah 55:8-11 (in context)

ISAIAH 55:8-11 *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. ⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it produce and sprout, And providing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; ¹¹ So will My word be which goes out of My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the purpose for which I sent it.*

We are finite beings and God is infinite. We cannot know what He is thinking but we can know what He says in His Word. We tend to think of God blessing us in good times and abandoning us in bad times. The reality is that God is with us during the good times and bad times. When we are struggling the most, God is often the closest. We are looking for God in big and dramatic ways, when often times He reveals Himself with a whisper.

+ Application

Let us look at a few problem passages from the Old Testament, and then we will put them through the rubric of the three points above.

The Problem Passages:

DEUTERONOMY 20:17 *But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you.*

1 SAMUEL 15:3 *Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.*

JOSHUA 6:21 *They utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.*

The Difficulty:

These three passages show examples of the Israelites working toward occupying the land that God promised their forefather Abraham. The basic command from God was to drive all the current people groups out of the land of Canaan, as God would give this land to Israel as an inheritance. The troubling parts of these passages come from God's command to kill the people groups living in Canaan, even including women, children, and animals. No matter how you slice it, this is a difficult thing for us to swallow, knowing what God's character looks like in other parts of the Bible. Especially when we look at Jesus and His teachings, it can be difficult to square these things together.

There is context to these commands that will help us understand what God is doing through Israel and why the other people groups needed to be driven out of the land. But it is important to acknowledge before we give these answers that these questions are still difficult, and we must wrestle through them.

Ultimately, we do have to come to terms with the fact that God at least permits horrible things to happen in the world. God is all-powerful, and nothing can happen outside of His permissive will, so we have to wrestle with the fact that children get sick and die, horrible things happen to people every day, and the world is fundamentally broken.

1. The Big Story (Know the Big Context)

Before we can understand the nature of God's commands to Israel, we must first be aware of the big context of the biblical story. God's commands to Israel do not happen in a vacuum, and the story of God's work in the world unfolds in the narrative of the Bible. The chart below lists the major narrative moves through the biblical story, starting with creation up until the coming of Christ, which covers approximately 4,000 years of history.

God Creates Humans in His Image

- Human Sin: Creation is Broken
- God Promises to Destroy the Seed of the Serpent Through the Seed of the Woman
- God Chooses Abraham and Makes Promises
- God Will Give Abraham Descendants in the Promised Land
- Abraham's Descendants Go to the Promised Land and Continue to Disobey God
- Israel loses the Promised Land
- God Sends Jesus, the Descendant of Abraham, to Defeat Sin and Death in the Promised Land

The Big Story in context is that God intended to save humans. He planned from the beginning to defeat the power of sin and death through the descendants of Abraham in the land promised to Abraham. It was not until Moses and the Exodus from Egypt that the Israelites could even think about going into the Promised Land. Once they arrived, they had to deal with the reality of the people groups already occupying the land.

2. The Immediate Context of Israel

The commands at issue were given by God when the Israelites were entering the Promised Land of Canaan, while they were battling these other groups during the period of the Judges, and when they were facing opposition from these nations during the period of the Kings. Its important that we note a couple of things related to context.

a. The commands were specific to the Israelites in a specific time and place:

God's commands to Israel under the leadership of Joshua, the Judges, and the Kings were specifically directed toward Israel in the Promised Land. These commands are in no way normative, nor were they meant to be repeated in the future by different groups of people. In the Big Context of the biblical story, God chose Abraham's family to be the ones who would experience God's promises in the world.

In Genesis chapter 3, God told Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the seed of the serpent. The promise was that God would send a human descendent of Eve to destroy sin and death (the legacy of the serpent). God later promises to Abraham that he will have many descendants, that they will have a great name, and that they will inherit a specific piece of land.

God's promises to Abraham mean that God intended to destroy sin and death through the descendants of Abraham and in the land that He promised to them. In order for this to happen, Abraham's descendants needed to occupy the land, and the sinful influence of other groups needed to be removed from the Promised Land.

b. The commands were intended to preserve Israel as God's "set apart" people for the sake of the world:

Why did the Canaanites need to be removed from the Promised Land? The answer is simple: God needed Abraham's descendants to be set apart from the sinful and wicked cultures of the world. We know that the people groups living in Canaan participated in all kinds of idolatry, sexual immorality, and even child sacrifice. Almost every time that the people of Israel got into trouble in the Old Testament, they ignored the commands of the Lord and became influenced by the people around them. God gave the Israelites a distinct Law to live by because He wanted them to display a new way of living.

The preservation of God's chosen people in the Promised Land would eventually lead to a blessing and salvation for all nations. However, every time that Israel walked away from God's laws and into the arms of the Canaanite cultures around them, they brought humanity farther away from experiencing freedom from sin and death. When the Israelites mingled with the Canaanites, it led them into sexual immorality. It led them to act unjustly. It led them to abuse and sacrifice their children, all of which eventually led to their rejection of God as their King.

The key issue is that the Canaanite cultures represented the danger of influencing Israel to act according to the sinful and destructive ways of the world. God makes it clear in Deuteronomy 20:17-18 when He tells the Israelites to completely destroy these groups of people because *"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."* Israel needed to remain holy for the sake of all people, and the Canaanite influence would move them away from their calling as God's "set apart" people. Eventually, Israel did succumb to the influence of the nations around them. Israel came to rampantly worship idols, to behave unjustly, and to walk away from their calling as God's people. Because of this, the Israelites lost the Promised Land. Many were killed, and the rest were taken as exiles in Assyria, Babylon, and finally Persia.

3. Remember the Nature and the Purpose of God

At every stage of this story, it is important that we remember that God's intended purpose was to save humanity through Abraham's descendants. With the view of hindsight, we know that God was preparing the way for Jesus to come as The Faithful Israelite who would take the consequences of sin and death for the entire world. God's plan from the beginning involved rescuing people from all nations, not just Israel. Jesus reveals that God's character is merciful, humble, and self-giving. God is also a God of justice. He deals with sin, wickedness, and evil in appropriate measure. God does not allow the vile and wicked things of the world to go unchecked forever, and He eventually steps in to judge in the proper time.

God has the moral authority to judge individuals and groups because of sin. The Bible is clear that God has the moral authority to judge individuals and groups of people due to their sins. God is the Creator of the entire universe, and He is the standard for what is good, right, praiseworthy, and life-giving. God's nature defines goodness, life, love, and righteousness. Sin and evil bring death, hopelessness, and suffering into God's creation. In His goodness and justice, God will only let these things go on for so long before dealing with them. Ask yourself this question: "Would a loving God allow something as horrifying as rape, murder, or child abuse to go on for all of eternity?" The answer to that is obviously NO. God does not allow these things to go on for all time. God is merciful, but He does judge justly.

ISAIAH 13:11 *So I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their wrongdoing; I will also put an end to the audacity of the proud and humiliate the arrogance of the tyrants.*

PSALM 9:8 *And He will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples fairly.*

Even with all these explanations, it is still hard to grasp why the command would be given to kill the women and children from these people groups. There is no easy answer for this, and it is something that we must wrestle through, but some context will be helpful. As we have established, these Canaanite children were living in cultures that were so completely wicked that those living in them did not have hope of changing their ways. If this is the case, then all the children living in these people groups would go on to live sinful and wicked lives apart from God.

At our church, we believe that small children who pass away before they come to an age of understanding will get to be with Jesus after they die. Jesus speaks clearly about the importance of children to Him (Luke 18:16). Even after King David loses a son in 2 Samuel 12:23, he says "Now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." David has the expectation that he will see his son again after he dies. If we believe that children who pass get to be with the Lord, and if God, who completely knows the future, knew that these children would grow in a culture that would lead them into wickedness, then we can determine that God was in some way having mercy on these children, who otherwise would not have spent eternity with Him. If you want a more detailed explanation of this view, look at William Lane Craig's blog titled "#16 Slaughter of the Canaanites." ²

+ Conclusion

When we come to difficult passages in Scripture, we must remember the big context, the immediate context, and God's purpose and His nature. In the case of our difficult text today, we can find clarity in the answers to these questions:

1. **The Big Story** is that God began to deal with the problems of sin and death through Abraham's descendants in the land of Canaan.

2. **The Immediate Context** is that the Canaanites were completely wicked, and God was using Israel in a specific time and place as the tool of His righteous judgment against these people groups.
3. **God's Purpose** was that Israel should remain set apart from the world's cultures so that one day He would send Jesus to save the entire world. He was slow to judgment and even merciful in His timing with the Canaanites.

From these "problem passages," we learn that God's judgment is just, but He is longsuffering to judge. God deals with sin and wickedness, but even in judging these things, He was preparing the way that people from every tribe and tongue could be saved from the bondage of sin and the inevitability of death.

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¹ www.biblestudytools.com/lexicon

² <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/slaughter-of-the-canaanites/>