

God's Viewpoint of War and Violence

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—Psalm 46:9

We are now well into the twenty-first century. World conditions are rapidly deteriorating. The people that we have trusted in, the things that we have come to know and enjoy, and have even taken for granted, are disappearing. Many in the world today live

in a constant state of fear. We see firsthand that world tensions are at an all-time high. Conflicts, wars, and acts of terrorism now fill our headlines and news reports. The world is caught up in a frenzy, which has led many to fear for their very existence. A struggle between the supposed powers of good and evil on the earth is underway. There has been a call to arms, which has led to violence being rendered for violence. A great deal of pressure has been put upon individuals to “join the fight” at all cost.

Mankind in general is not looking to God for help, but is relying on its own methods for bringing peace to the world. In this setting we find the child of God faced with many important decisions. What do the Scriptures teach concerning violence, war, and killing? How can the Scriptures be used as a basis for being opposed to war and violence? It is our hope that the ensuing discussion will help the reader with the answers to these important questions.

Old Testament Descriptions of God

God is often described in the Bible using warlike terms—the “anger of the LORD,” and the “wrath of the LORD”—as mentioned in Numbers 11:10,33. The Heavenly Father is like “a consuming fire,” for “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 10:31) “To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence.” (Deut. 32:35) The Lord is “a jealous God,” and “a man of war,” who rises up to judge the nations in his appointed time.—Exod. 20:5; 15:3

Israel’s Men of War

In God’s dealings with the nation of Israel, we see that they were instructed to number themselves by armies. “The LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of the congregation, ... after they were come out of the land of Egypt, saying, Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names, every male by their polls; From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel: thou and Aaron shall number them by their armies.”—Num. 1:1-3

The Israelites were often led by men of war in their struggles to gain possession of their promised land. Joshua, the “captain of the host of the LORD,” was instructed by an angel on how to destroy Jericho. (Josh. 5:14; 6:2-5) With the blowing of trumpets, and divine intervention, the walls of the city “fell down flat,” and were “utterly destroyed.”—Josh. 6:20,21

God taught his people how to fight. We are told by David, “Blessed be the LORD my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight: My goodness, and my fortress; my high tower, and my deliverer; my shield, and he in whom I trust; who subdueth my people under me.”—Ps. 144:1,2

God Fights for His People

God fought for his people when they were being pursued by Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and his army of horses and chariots. “When Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the LORD. ... And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.” (Exod. 14:10-14) The waters of the sea parted by the power of God, and the host of Israel was delivered; the armies of Egypt were destroyed.

Recounting a later experience, “The LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites: ... And Moses spake unto the people, saying, Arm some of yourselves unto the

war, and let them go against the Midianites, ... Of every tribe a thousand, throughout all the tribes of Israel, shall ye send to the war. ... And they slew the kings of Midian.”—Num. 31:1-8

“A Time to Every Purpose”

Another set of scriptures to be considered from the Old Testament is found in Ecclesiastes 3:1,3,8: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: ... A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ... A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.” Many people have used these scriptures to justify killing and going to war. However, when we examine this more closely we see that Solomon was writing as a result of his many past experiences and observations. He is making a point from a social perspective. He sees men laboring hard in all manner of endeavors, and he wisely inquires, “What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.”—vss. 9,10

Solomon ends his discussion in the Book of Ecclesiastes with, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”—Eccles. 12:13,14

A God of Love

In light of the foregoing, we now pose a legitimate question that many ask: If God is a God of love as the Bible tells us, how can we understand his commands

to the children of Israel, such as to “utterly destroy” their enemies? (I John 4:8,16; Deut. 12:2; 20:17) We must remember that the nation of Israel was God’s covenanted people: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”—Amos 3:2

The fact that the children of Israel were God’s chosen people is taught clearly in the Bible. We note these words of the Prophet Jeremiah: “So have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the LORD; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory.” I will be the “God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.” (Jer. 13:11; 31:1) Speaking to Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, God said, “In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”—Gen. 28:14

The land of Canaan had been promised to the “seed,” or offspring, of Abraham—that is, Israel—centuries earlier. (Gen. 11:31; 12:5-7) However, other peoples had settled in the land prior to the Israelites arrival as the rightful heirs under the leadership of Joshua. Terrible conditions existed in the promised land of Canaan when Israel came to possess it. The Philistines, Amorites, and others who occupied the land were very corrupt, as they engaged in all forms of idolatrous worship, even offering up human sacrifices in connection with their false gods and religion. (Deut. 18: 9-14) It was because their wickedness and depravity had reached such a level that God, in his wisdom and justice, saw that it would be best to destroy them and to place in the land a people who, under his instructions, would attain to a higher degree of civilization.

Thus, God directed the Israelites to conquer Canaan. It was not something done without his permission and direction. Prior to entering the land of promise, the Lord had established a system of laws with the Israelites. They understood if they disobeyed those laws, they would be punished. One of these laws was, “Thou shalt not kill.” (Exod. 20:13) Israel’s neighbors constantly made war against them, but if Israel would obey God, he would help them. If they disobeyed God, however, he would let their enemies succeed.—Lev. 26:3,6-8,14,17

A Temporary Situation

Later in the Old Testament, God made it clear through the prophets that the present time of evil, hate, war, and poverty was a temporary situation. His plan will ultimately eliminate all warfare, hate, despair, and poverty. This will take place when his kingdom is set up. Through the Prophet Isaiah, God said concerning this time: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.”—Isa. 2:4; 11:9

New Testament View of War

Let us now consider God’s teachings in the New Testament, in which it soon becomes apparent that a change has taken place. The Heavenly Father is now dealing differently with the nation of Israel, and it all begins with his Son, Jesus. In his pre-human existence, God’s Son is called “the Word [Greek: *logos*]” of God. (John 1:1, *The Emphatic Diaglott*) Later in this same chapter, John writes:

“The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” (vs. 14) “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” (vss. 10,11) We know that “his own” refers to the nation of Israel. He was rejected by them in fulfillment of the scripture, “He is despised and rejected of men.”—Isa. 53:3

When Pilate asked the Jews, who were gathered at our Lord’s trial, “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified.” (Matt. 27:22) As we read at the close of the account, Pilate washed his hands of the matter finding no fault with him. “Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.”—Matt. 27:25

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he longed to help Israel. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.” (Luke 13:34,35) Because of this rejection of the only begotten Son of God, Israel failed to obtain what it had long sought. They had desired to obtain continued blessings and prosperity under God’s direction. “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for ... (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day.”—Rom. 11:7,8

Examples to Teach Us

We now again mention, using the Scriptures, the purpose of God's Old Testament relationship with Israel. "Brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers [the Israelites] were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; ... Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted."—I Cor. 10:1,6

From this record we have warnings and the opportunity to learn from Israel's failures so that we can do our best to serve God. Natural Israel never was heir unconditionally of any part of the promise made to Abraham: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12:3) When God entered into his covenant with Israel, the understanding was that if they would keep the Law, they would have ever lasting life. This would then allow them to inherit the promise made to Abraham and give them the privilege of blessing "all families of the earth."

Heirs of God's Promises

The words of the Apostle Peter, "The promise is unto you, and to your children," are in full harmony with all of the Lord's dealings with Israel, including his covenant with them as the children of his servant Abraham. (Acts 2:39) They still had this hope in Jesus' day, as Paul said, "Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come." (Acts 26:7) When Israel, as a nation, was proven unworthy of becoming heir of the Abrahamic promises, they were, symbolically speaking, broken off, and the Gentiles were given

the opportunity to be grafted in to take their place. These Gentiles, now as individuals, could become partakers of “the root and fatness of the olive tree”—that is, the Abrahamic promises.—Rom. 11:17

From that time on, only those individuals, Jew or Gentile, who accepted Christ were made “heirs according to the promise,” as members of the spiritual seed of Abraham. (Gal. 3:29) “The stone [Jesus] which the builders [Israel as a nation] rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: ... The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”—Matt. 21:42,43

Since Israel was not ready to be used in the blessing of other nations, the standing they had under their covenant with God ceased, and the promise of being a “kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” also ceased to be theirs. (Exod. 19:6) It was “given to a nation,”—to spiritual Israel—“a royal priesthood, an holy nation.” (I Pet. 2:9) We are told that this nation is separate and distinct from all others, and is gathered out by God from all peoples of the earth—“a people for his name.”—Acts 15:14

Rejection of Violence and War

Our Lord Jesus Christ is certainly the key to the change in the teachings that are brought out in the New Testament. Jesus rejected the concepts of violence and warfare that had come to be known and accepted in the world. Through his teachings, and by his example, he provided us with a much higher standard. “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men

know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:34,35) This is a higher commandment, a higher law, than was given to the Jews under their covenant with God. The law given by Christ is the law of the Christian’s covenant; it is the law of love. It is given to all those who have entered the school of Christ, and who are hoping to become part of Spiritual Israel. Jesus summed up the commandment of love in this way: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ... Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”—Matt. 22:37,39

Violence, as a result of sin, is running rampant in the world today. It exists in many forms and involves nearly every culture in some way or another. Satan, the author of sin, goes about the world “as a roaring lion, ... seeking whom he may devour.” (I Pet. 5:8) He is the “god of this world” and “hath blinded the minds of them which believe not.” (II Cor. 4:4) Because of Satan’s influence, violence pervades today’s society.

Today we see violence in the home, among neighbors, in schools, churches, and the workplace, even among strangers, to say nothing of the violent conflict among nations. All of this is contrary to the teachings of Jesus. He rejected violence, and the personal use of force to settle disputes. In John 18:10,11, for example, Jesus corrected Peter for drawing his sword against a servant of the High Priest, which resulted in injury to the servant. He told Peter, “Put up thy sword into the sheath.”

We never again hear of the disciples using force or violence in the service of the Lord. Jesus could

have called into service “twelve legions of angels,” but he did not do so. (Matt. 26:53) He was not willing to use divine power for his personal welfare. Jesus never prayed for deliverance from his troubles, but cheerfully endured them as part of his sacrifice. Followers of Christ should also be doing the same thing. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 2:5

New Attitude Toward Enemies

Our Lord also preached concerning a new attitude toward our enemies. “I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” (Matt. 5:44) We might at first say that this is a high standard to live up to, and we would be correct. This type of love goes well beyond loving your neighbor. It has been said that it is easy to love those who love us. To love our enemies, however, requires a heart condition so full of love that not even an enemy could stir up in our hearts any evil intentions. There would be no room for acts of retribution or hatred.

This does not mean that we approve of evil or injustice, but we are not to take part in it. We are opposed to the oppression of the weak and helpless. The mindset of many in the world today is to justify doing wrong to others in order to save self. We are to “hate the evil, and love the good,” but we are not to recompense evil to others, even our enemies. (Amos 5:15) Let us remember that those who sin and do evil in the sight of God will have their reward.—I Cor. 3:8

Principles of Life

Our Lord Jesus taught principles of living which are characterized by sympathy, meekness, mercy, purity, and peace making. "Blessed are they that mourn: ... Blessed are the meek: ... Blessed are the merciful: ... Blessed are the pure in heart: ... Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." (Matt. 5:4-9) Our Lord spoke these words in his Sermon on the Mount to instruct his disciples and, in turn, us. He wants us to be sympathetic toward those in difficult circumstances, to practice meekness and self-control, to be merciful to others, to have pure hearts, devoid of anger and malice, and to always be a peacemaker. We will not always be able to do these things perfectly, but we want to have perfect and pure intent. The Lord's people are to be helpful. "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men," and not join in with the sentiments of this warring world.—Gal. 6:10

Purity of heart toward God shows itself in efforts to live peaceably and to promote peace in others. The Apostle Paul wrote, "As much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." (Rom. 12:18) This is especially needful in this time in which we are now living, even if peace is not reciprocated back to us.

The enemies of righteousness love "darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19) The Lord is not looking for these, but for those who are so faithful to the principles of righteousness, that they will exercise them even toward their enemies when persecuted. "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you

falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.” (Matt. 5:11,12) The Apostle Peter also wrote: “If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.” (I Pet. 4:16) Our Lord gives us personal assurance when he tells us: “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”—John 16:33

Responsibilities of Christians

We are to obey man’s laws when they do not conflict with God’s laws. However, when they do conflict, the Christian must be responsible to God’s laws, not man’s. Note the admonitions we are given concerning this. “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. ... Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.” (I Pet. 2:9,11) “We ought to obey God rather than men.”—Acts 5:29

We know that the Heavenly Father holds obedience to his will as a very important matter. We have been shown this by the many lessons we have noted concerning the nation of Israel. An important principle Jesus taught us is this: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” (Matt. 22:21) We are further told: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.” (I Pet. 2:13) “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; ...

honour to whom honour.” (Rom. 13:7) These principles all apply except when our trained conscience and God’s laws would be violated.

The Heavenly Father is working out everything in this present troubled world according to his plans and purposes. He is looking especially at how we are living up to the teachings that were revealed to us by his dear Son. The fiery storms of the present time “shall try every man’s work of what sort it is.” (I Cor. 3:13) It will reveal the type of character we have developed during our lives. Our faith should be built upon the precious promises of God, which are pictured as “gold, silver, precious stones.” We are not to build improperly with other materials that do not stand up to this test by fire. The Apostle tells us that everything that is built according to human theories, methods, and traditions, pictured as “wood, hay, stubble,” will be destroyed.—vss. 10-15

The Heavenly Father is allowing all nations to deceive themselves into thinking that they can solve all of the world’s problems. We have seen that peace has never been long lasting; new conflicts arise suddenly. These events God has allowed to prepare the world of mankind for his kingdom of everlasting peace, to be ruled by his Son, Christ Jesus, the “Prince of Peace.” (Isa. 9:6,7) “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth,” Jesus taught us to pray.—Matt. 6:10

Concluding Thoughts

In the Old Testament experiences of Israel, God permitted wars to be fought in order to accomplish certain purposes concerning the original promises

which had been given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Most of these conflicts related to the land that had been promised centuries before to the people of Israel, but which had become occupied by heathen and wicked nations. Such wars and conflicts were authorized by God, and not by man nor earthly governments.

By contrast, in the New Testament, those former experiences of Israel had served their purpose as far as God was concerned. This purpose was that the lessons they had learned through these difficult experiences would serve as a "schoolmaster" to bring them to Christ, the Prince of Peace.—Gal. 3:24

Jesus rejected the concepts of violence and war. He taught by example, and through the establishment of a commandment "to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," and to "love thy neighbour as thyself." (Matt. 22:37,39) This new attitude toward our enemies rejects the use of force, violence, and killing. Thus Paul tells us, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."—Heb. 12:14

Soon, our opening scripture will be fulfilled: "He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire." (Ps. 46:9) God's Word further promises: "Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise." (Isa. 60:18) All those who have been killed as the result of war and other violent acts will be raised from the dead. (John 5:28,29) All people will one day know everlasting peace, and have the opportunity to then live in

harmony on a restored, perfect earth forever. Such a glorious outcome will be the culmination of the restoration of “all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”—Acts 3:21 ■