

First Love  
***Bad God***  
July 28, 2019

**PRE-SERVICE VIDEO (2)**

**Welcome / Prayer – Shannon (3)**

**Worship Songs – We Believe / Bigger Than I Thought (9)**

**Behind The Scenes – Shannon & Video (3)**

**Feature – You Give Love a Bad Name (3)**

Good morning everyone.

You *know* you're in a different kind of church when you hear Bon Jovi right before the sermon

But it's an appropriate place to begin in this second installment of our series *First Love* because it really does raise the issue we're going to look at today ... which is ...

If those of us who are Christians – and I know not everyone here or watching online is, and that's great. We're glad to have you with us ...

If those of us who are Christians are supposed to love God first and most – which is what Jesus said and what we talked about in last Sunday's message – and if you weren't here you can check it out via our app, website and podcast ...

If those of us who are Christians are supposed to love God first and most – with all our heart, mind, soul and strength – how do we reconcile that commandment with the fact that certain parts of the Bible paint a less-than-lovable picture of God – parts in which God's words and deeds seem to "give love a bad name?"

If, as noted atheist Richard Dawkins puts it in so bluntly his book, *The God Delusion* ...

**The God of the Old Testament truly is ...**

"... the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser ...

... a misogynistic, homophobic, racist,

.... infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal,

... pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic,

... capriciously malevolent bully.”<sup>i</sup>

Dude has a vocabulary.

If God is really like that, how can we – in good conscience – love Him *at all*, let alone first and most?

And just so you’ll know, this isn’t some hypothetical or philosophical mental exercise.

J. Warner Wallace, author of *Cold Case Christianity*, says that this question is one of the major barriers to belief, especially among younger people who grew up in church and walked away. It consistently registers in the top concerns whenever he runs online surveys.<sup>ii</sup>

Closer to home, I’ve heard some of you say you have family and friends for whom this issue is a major stumbling block. And maybe you yourself have wondered about it, too.

Why does the God of the Old Testament seem so angry and *un-loving* at times? How could a God so supposedly *good* act so seemingly *bad*?

That’s what we’re going to look at this morning.

## Why God is “Bad”

Now for some of you with limited Bible background, you may be thinking “what kinds of things are you talking about, Rick?”

We don’t have time to go into a full-blown Old Testament survey this morning so I’ll just summarize the objectionable passages into three categories.<sup>iii</sup>

### 1. First category is “crimes” for which God prescribes the death penalty.

In the Law of Moses, the following infractions merit death:

- Sacrificing to a god other than Yahweh (Exodus 22:20)
- Persistent rebelliousness on the part of a child (Deuteronomy 21:18–21)
- Hitting or cursing your parents (Exodus 21:15 and 17)
- Working on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2)
- Premarital sexual intercourse (Deuteronomy 22:13–21)

And if you’re a priest and your daughter becomes a prostitute, you have to burn her alive. (Leviticus 21:9).

Quite a list, eh?

## **2. The second category is the level of God's anger and wrath in punishing his people, Israel.**

For example (and this is just one), the Old Testament book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel tells us that, for some reason, King David decided to take a census to determine how many men in his kingdom were of fighting age.

In response, God sent a prophet to announce His displeasure.

### **The punishment for David's sin?**

*The Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died. 2 Samuel 24:15 (NIV)*

David makes a decision that does not please God, and God kills 70,000 Israelites for it?

Seems rather harsh, doesn't it?

Then, finally, the third category – which seems to generate the most angst of all – is ...

## **3. God ordering the Israelites to commit genocide in war ...**

... with the most extreme example being what is sometimes called "The Conquest of Canaan."

When the newly formed nation of Israel, after forty years of wandering in the desert, is about to enter into the land that God had promised to Abraham 400 years earlier, Moses gives them this instruction:

*"As for the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is going to give you as an inheritance ...*

*... you must not allow a single living thing to survive. Instead you must utterly annihilate them ... just as the Lord your God has commanded you." Deuteronomy 20:16-17 (NET)*

And, according to the book of Joshua, that's what they did.

Chapter 10 tells us that "Joshua defeated the whole land, including the hill country, the Negev, the lowlands, the slopes, and all their kings. He left no survivors. He annihilated everything that breathed, just as the Lord God of Israel had commanded."<sup>iv</sup>

In all, thirty-one cities wiped out with no terms of surrender offered and no chance to relocate to another land.

## **Possibilities**

So, what are we to make of this – especially in the light of who Jesus of Nazareth was and the ethic of non-violence and enemy-love that He both preached and practiced?

I mean, it's hard to reconcile *that* image with what we see of God in those three categories, isn't it?

And just so you'll know, this is an issue Christians have wrestled with for ages. You and I (as well as Richard Dawkins and his compadres) are not the first to notice the discrepancy or to question the character of God, at least, as He appears in the Old Testament.

And because it's been around for so long, there have been many "solutions" proposed – some better than others. I'm just going to lay out a few of them and you can decide whether or not you think they have merit.

One possibility is that ...

### **1. The God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New.**

This is probably the conclusion that people jump to the fastest because it seems like an obvious answer. But there are many problems with it ... which is why it was rejected soon after it was proposed in the early second century.

We don't have time to go into all of the reasons *why* it isn't a good solution other than to say that if it was true, Jesus would have made it clear in his teachings. But He didn't do that.

Instead, Jesus fully embraced the God of the Old Testament – with all of the seemingly crazy stuff that bothers you and me – not just as "God" but as *His* Heavenly Father. In fact, one of Jesus' best friends, John, tells us that Jesus once went so far as to say "I and the Father are one."

So, while it might be convenient for P.R. purposes to divorce the Old Testament vision of God from Jesus, it's not possible ...

... which brings us to a second possible solution ... which is that ...

### **2. Much of the Old Testament language about war and punishment is actually hyperbole.**

In other words, things are overstated in the extreme (like 70K people dying in one day) for a purpose.

This theory is based on what researchers who study Ancient Near Eastern cultures (like Israel and other nations of that era) have discovered:

That, when it came to legal practices and customs, most "capital punishment" sanctions served as a kind of rhetorical denunciation. They were designed to express, in vivid form, a high moral ideal. It was a way of describing how serious the infraction was.

Such sanctions were *not*, researchers discovered, intended to function like statute law of our modern era, i.e.,

as literal and binding commands to kill people who have committed certain crimes ...

... which is why, in practice, the prescribed punishment was most often *not* carried out. Instead, most often, a ransom was paid.

For example, Exodus 21:29–32 addresses a case where, if an ox gored another person to death due to negligence on the part of the owner, “the owner also must be put to death.”

But the very next verse states that “if payment is demanded of him, he may ransom his life by paying whatever is demanded.”

So, the text literally demands a person be put to death in one sentence but assumes in the next that the actual punishment would be a fine set by the courts.<sup>vi</sup>

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Some biblical scholars think the same idea of hyperbolic language also applies to descriptions of the genocides of the Canaan Conquest that we read in Deuteronomy and Joshua. And they think that because of *what else* the Bible says about that particular military action.<sup>vii</sup>

Joshua reports that God commanded “utter destruction,” and that he followed that command “to the T.”

However, if we read the text further, we find that Joshua did *not* take all of the land (Joshua 13:1-5), and that many of the people who were supposedly either annihilated or removed from the land were actually still living there (Joshua 13:13).

In fact, in the book that immediately follows Joshua in the Old Testament (the Book of Judges) we read this *astounding* statement in the very first sentence:

*After Joshua died, the Israelites asked the Lord, “Who should lead the invasion against the Canaanites and launch the attack?” Judges 1:1 (NET)*

Question ... how can you invade and attack people who have already been wiped out?

**Answer ... in verse 28 of that same chapter:**

*Whenever Israel was strong militarily, they forced the Canaanites to do hard labor, but they never totally conquered them. Judges 1:28 (NET)*

The answer is that the Israelites didn’t totally wipe out the Canaanites.

Of course, the question then, is what is gained by telling the story of Israel’s entry into the Promised Land in hyperbolic language?

One author suggests that maybe “the stories of the conquest of Canaan were to ancient Israelites what the stories of William Wallace are to the Scots. Written long after the time of these heroes, they were meant to demonstrate courage, resolve, and faith and to inspire later generations that were still struggling against their own enemies.”

“These stories,” he writes, “were written from the theological perspective of the ancient Near East, where gods sent heroes into battle and fought alongside them.

“No one reads Sir Walter Scott’s book on William Wallace to find a model of ethics of war. They read it to be inspired by a national hero. The same was true of the Book of Joshua.”<sup>viii</sup>

So, that’s the second possible solution. The language is intentionally extreme for a purpose.

A third possible solution is that the problem really isn’t with God or with the Bible.

### **3. The problem is that you and I have a limited and flawed understanding of love and justice.**

Here’s what I mean.

When we read in the Old Testament that entire cities are wiped out by the Israelites or, in some cases by God Himself – as in the flood of Noah or in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – we immediately think ...

- But what about the innocent little kid?
- What about the pregnant mom?
- What about the sick old man?
- Why aren’t they spared? Why aren’t they given a chance to repent?
- Is that what a loving God would do?”

You and I tend to think about love and justice primarily in terms of *individuals* where what happens to each singular person matters most.

But at least half of the world – back in that time and still today – *doesn’t* think like that.

In the eastern cultures – meaning the Far East as well as the Middle Eastern biblical cultures – the community and nation are considered to be just as important if not *more important* than the individual. And the Bible – God’s Word – comes from those cultures not ours ...

... which is why a lot of what happens in the Bible – Old Testament and New – deals with communities and nations. God’s love and justice are applied at *that* level just as much as at the individual level – and maybe

even more so.

As Westerners, that seems odd to us. It's not how our culture has trained us to think.

But could it be that *our* perspective is off? That our judgement of what is "good" and what is "loving" is off because of our individualism?

And, if so, could it be that, for instance, God's judgment on the Canaanites *as a nation* was totally justified?

In fact, that is exactly the case Moses makes after telling Joshua to wipe them out.

**Wipe them out, he says ...**

*Otherwise, they [collectively] will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 20:18 (NET)*

Now, to you and me that means nothing. Or it sounds trivial like "they're going to make you eat pork" or something mundane.

But to historical researchers who have come to understand Canaanite culture – the word "detestable" is an understatement because the Canaanites and surrounding cultures worshiped the god Moloch.

And that meant some really terrible things, the most terrible being child sacrifice.

Specifically, they would light a fire under the bronze statue of the god and then lay the child on the outstretched burning hands. And the infant would literally cook. It's skin would literally melt.

While this was going on there would be drums beating loudly so that the parents of the child would not hear its screams.<sup>ix</sup>

And God's concern was that the people of Israel – the people through whom He was going to send the Messiah ... God's concern was that they not be corrupted by the thoroughly corrupted people of Canaan. And so they had to be removed from the land.

In addition, God's decree of judgment on the Canaanites wasn't issued on a whim. It's not like one day He just said, "you're out of here."

Four hundred years beforehand, God had made himself known to them.<sup>x</sup>

When Abraham – who was living in the land of Canaan – was about to sacrifice his son Isaac and God stopped him, it was a testimony to them that the true God doesn't approve of such detestable practices.

But the Canaanites rejected what they knew about the one true God and moved deeper into sin until, one day,

it reached such a level of severity that God decided to use the Israelites to bring judgement on them.

However, *even then*, the Bible tells us that the Canaanites had heard about what God had done for the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt (Joshua 2:8-12). And *even then* they could have repented and turned to Him. But they did not.<sup>xi</sup>

And because of that ... because as a community and as a nation the corruption was so deep, there was no possibility of redemption. And so judgment was in order.

Again, that sounds odd and maybe even repulsive to our Westernized way of thinking about justice.

But God ordering the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites (whether it's total annihilation or just minimizing their influence)? How could *that* ever be considered a "loving" thing to do?

Maybe a more modern example will help us understand.

Not too long ago – and some of you may remember this – in the former Yugoslavia, things got really ugly. Churches were burned, women were raped, and innocents brutally murdered.

Miroslav Volf, a theologian who lived there at the time said the experience changed his thinking on God's love and justice. Once, he said, he believed that wrath and anger were beneath God because "God is love" and divine love should be beyond wrath – which is what many of us believe, too.

"However," he wrote ...

"My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced.

"My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God *not* being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days!

"How should God react to [such] carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness?"

Not at all Volf says. Instead, God *should be* fiercely angry!

And then he concludes:

"Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I actually came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil.



And then he concludes:

**“God isn’t wrathful *in spite* of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.”<sup>xii</sup>**

Friends, because most of us have only known peace and tranquility ... because most of us have never lived in the brutality that characterized Yugoslavia and the people of Canaan ... most of us do not understand the raw power of evil.

Therefore, it is hard for us to imagine why sometimes the most loving thing that God can do is to remove the source of that evil.

As Volf put it – God isn’t sometimes wrathful *in spite* of being love. God is sometimes wrathful because God is love.

... which brings us to the final possibility – at least in terms of what we have time for today.

It could be that the reason we struggle with the seeming discontinuity between the God of the Old Testament and Jesus ... that the reason we think the God of the Old Testament is primarily angry and vengeful is that ...

#### **4. We’re missing the “big picture” of the Old Testament.**

I like the way Heather Zempel, who is one of the pastors at National Community Church in Washington, D.C. explains this.

“In page after page of the Old Testament,” she says, “we see God’s mercy, his hope, his forgiveness.”

“We see a God who commands hospitality to the stranger, fairness to the poor, protection and provision to widows, orphans and refugees; even fair treatment of animals.

“When we come to the texts of the Old Testament, we find a book that is shockingly progressive in its portrayal of divine love and its acceptance of foreigners and its affirmation of women.

“In fact,” she says, “the central confession of the Old Testament is found in Exodus 34:6” ...

**... which says ...**

*“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness ...*

*“... maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”  
Exodus 34:6 (NIV)*

“That,” she says, “is the central picture of God we find in the Old Testament. And it is repeated across every genre.

- It's mentioned in the law of Moses
- It's mentioned in the books of history
- It's mentioned in the poetry and the prophets.

"All across the Old Testament, we find that phrase – that idea - up over and over and over again."

And a couple of weeks ago we saw it in the story of Jonah. Remember why he was so upset after everyone in Nineveh – even the cows – repented?

*"I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, One who relents from sending calamity."*                      *Jonah 4:2 (NIV)*

And this is why, Zempel says, "we've got to hold these crazy (to us) stories [like taking the land of Canaan, and God's punishments for Israel's disobedience, and crimes that supposedly deserve the death penalty] ...

"... we have to hold those things in tension with this confession that we find all throughout its pages."

Bottom line: the Old Testament (and the Bible in general) is a story about a God on a relentless pursuit of people who He loves; a God who takes responsibility Himself for setting the world right.

This is a story of a God who brings his people from bondage to liberation and exile to restoration and eventually shows up in the skin of his own creation.<sup>xiii</sup>

Why?

**Because ...**

*God is love.                      1 John 4:8 (NIV)*

**Even If**

Now, what we've just done is to walk through four possible solutions to the fact that certain parts of the Bible – particularly the Old Testament – seem to paint a less-than-lovable picture of God.

And, as I said at the beginning, some are better than others. And you're welcome to form your own opinion on all of them.

For me, personally, I'm very comfortable with the last two. I'm 50/50 on the second one. And the first one, as I said, is just not possible.

But let's say, for sake of argument, that none of them are valid. Let's say, try as we might, we just can't make

sense of it all.

- We can't reconcile the over-the-top punishments spelled out in the Law of Moses.
- And we can't come to peace with Volf's idea that God is sometimes wrathful *because* God is love.

And, to be fair, that kind of thinking has been misused through the centuries – that because God commanded Israel to fight a “holy war,” so to speak, He wants us to do the same thing against our perceived enemies. That is not a valid application of the principle!

So, if we can't come to peace about all of this, what then?

Is our only option to turn away – to reject Christianity – as so many of the “new atheists” like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins tell us?

I don't think so.

Because even if we can't see how all the stuff we read in the Old Testament fits together, even if it doesn't make sense to us ...

**The Christian faith does not depend on the Old Testament.**

It doesn't depend on the events described in it. And it doesn't depend on our understanding or interpretation of it.

Instead, as Christians ...

We believe in the crucifixion  
We believe that Jesus conquered death  
We believe in the resurrection  
And we believe He's coming back again.

In other words, the Christians faith is rooted first and foremost in the literal man known as “Jesus of Nazareth.”

**The Christian faith depends who *He* was and what *He* did; and even more specifically, the event we call “the Resurrection.”**

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying – especially if you've been a Christian for a while. I am *not* saying that the OT is of no value to us. I am *not* saying that it's not God's Word.

Instead, I'm saying that when it comes to deciding whether or not to be a Christian, if the story of Jesus isn't true – and more specifically the event we call “the Resurrection” – if *that's* not true then none of the rest of it matters.

In fact, if the resurrection isn't real, you *shouldn't* be a Christian! We shouldn't even be here!

But if it *is* true, well, it's a whole new ballgame in so many ways.

If it *is* true, it clarifies and illuminates everything else – even the stuff we don't understand about God and the Old Testament. Jesus becomes the lens through which we view all those things.

And that's not my idea. That's what the first followers of Jesus said about him.

**One of them wrote:**

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways ... Hebrews 1:1 (NIV)*

And that's what we've been talking about this morning, right? The Old Testament.

**But, the writer continues:**

*In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. Hebrews 1:2 (NIV)*

In other words, there's a new revelation. There's a new word from God.

But not only is it new, the writer is saying ...

**It's actually better because ...**

*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. Hebrews 1:3*

In other words, "what we who have lived by the words of Moses and the Prophets now have in Jesus is *more* than just the words of Moses and the Prophets.

What we now have in Jesus is God with skin on. What we now have in Jesus is the exact representation of the God we've been hearing about from Moses and the Prophets ...

... which means: *if you really want to know what God is like, look at Jesus*. If you're confused and perplexed by what Moses and the Prophets wrote, focus on Jesus.

And there are so many potential applications of that principle – which is why we have small groups and Bible studies and sermons about Jesus and who He is and what He taught and so on and so forth.

As we say all the time around here, if a guy can predict his own death and resurrection and then pull it off, we ought to listen to whatever else He has to say!

## **Conclusion**

But let's just narrow it down to the point of this series, *First Love*.

The question before us is today is whether or not a God who sometimes does really confusing things – things that may not fit our perception of loving ... and by the way, I'm not just talking about God's actions in the Old Testament, I'm also talking about God's action in your life and mine *today*, right now.

... because the real concern for a lot of us isn't so much about what happened centuries ago but what happened last week or last month or last year.

The real concern for a lot of us has to do with trying to figure out what God *was* doing then or *is* doing right now. And we're confused because what we're seeing and experiencing doesn't fit our perception of what a good and loving God should be doing.

So the question before us is whether or not a God who did *and still does* confusing things is worthy of being our first love; worthy of us loving Him first and most, with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength?

How does Jesus of Nazareth help us to answer that question?

It's simple.

**It's not confusing at all.**

*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Romans 8:5 (NIV)

While we – and the "we" here is collective – while all of us, while all of humanity had decided that we were going to make our own rules and ignore God; while God's creation was languishing because of our sin individually and collectively, Jesus of Nazareth stepped in and took into Himself all of the evil of this world.

<BAND GET INTO PLACE>

<words ... oh yeah!>

<invite people to stand and sing>

**Worship – Oh How He Loves Us (4)**

**CLOSING COMMENTS (2)**

1. Teacher Supply Giveaway – Thurs, help needed 5-6 people on both shifts, sign up at table or via the app or website
2. Offering at the door

### 3. Blessing

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

<sup>ii</sup> J. Warner Wallace @<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJb9BA65YAq>

<sup>iii</sup> From <https://www.adamhamilton.com/blog/gods-violence-in-the-old-testament-the-problem>

<sup>iv</sup> Joshua 10:40

<sup>v</sup> John 10:30

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew Flannagan, Ph.D. <https://www.equip.org/article/stoning-adulterers/>

<sup>vii</sup> See <https://unapologetic1.wordpress.com/2016/04/25/keeping-the-slaughter-of-canaan-in-context/> and <https://freethinkingministries.com/ten-problems-with-the-canaanite-objection/>

<sup>viii</sup> Adam Hamilton @ <https://www.adamhamilton.com/blog/gods-violence-in-the-old-testament-part-3-possible-solutions>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://crossexamined.org/god-behaving-badly-destruction-canaanites/>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.bethinking.org/bible/old-testament-mass-killings> comment on Gen 15

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xii</sup> Miroslav Volv, *Free of Charge*, see <https://www.whitehorseinn.org/2014/01/whi-1188-is-god-a-moral-monster>

<sup>xiii</sup> Heather Zemple @<https://theaterchurch.com/media/god-in-the-hands-of-angry-people/old-testament-god>