

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW WAR?

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Some of you love to work with jigsaw puzzles. You take a jumble of disconnected pieces and arrange them in the right order. Certain folks are so proud of their work they glaze and frame the finished product. Easy to understand why. The tedious task of interlocking the curves and the humps at just the right place can result in a satisfying and beautiful picture.

Don't we love to see the pieces fit together?

Wouldn't we love to see the same in life? But try as we might, the pieces seldom fit as neatly as a finished puzzle. Irregular parts inevitably linger. Gaping holes sometimes result. You've encountered these pieces. You know their names: unexpected death, cheating spouse, cancer-ridden kids. Some pieces just don't fit into our puzzle.

And, these days, our country is facing yet another one clumsy piece of the human puzzle: war. At this writing, war has just begun. What are we supposed to do with war? A quarter of a million American troops are marching in the sand of foreign soil. Even as I write, bombs seek targets, bullets rob youth, and soldiers interrogate prisoners. With only one step into the new millennium we face an ancient question: *Why does God allow war?*

The question is not a new one. According to the *Canadian Army Journal*, war has dominated documented history. Since 3600 B.C., the world has known only 292 years of peace. During this period there have been 14,531 wars. An estimated 3,640,000,000 lives have been lost in them. The value of them would pay for a golden belt around the world, 97 miles wide and 33 feet deep. ¹

War, so costly. War, so awful. The dying, the maiming. Those who aren't scarred physically are likely to be scarred emotionally. War bookmarks history and lives. We divide history

¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*. Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, p. 1571

into pre- and post-war eras. People are remembered as ones who fought in such-and-such war. The smoke of battle lingers long after the bodies are buried and the armistice is signed.

Then why does God allow it? The answer begins by looking at the puzzle from his perspective. My limited experience with jigsaw puzzles has taught me the importance of the picture on the outside of the box. If you don't see the picture from the angle of the maker, the challenge is just too great. If we don't see war and human conflict from God's perspective, our discussion will be futile. Any discussion of war must revolve around the character of God.

First, remember that **we have a loving God**. Scripture overflows with this essential truth.

“He loves whatever is just and good,
and his unfailing love fills the earth.” (Psalm 33:5)

“The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying:
‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.’” (Jeremiah 31:3)

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1)

“I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion.” (Hosea 2:19)

If we are going to consider God and war, we must begin with God and love. Every heavenly action is born out of passion for his children. God only does what is good. Just as important, God only does what is just.

We have a just God.

When WWI broke out, the war ministry of London dispatched a coded message to one of the British outposts in the inaccessible areas of Africa. The message read: “War is declared. Arrest all enemy aliens in your district.” The war Ministry received this reply: “Have arrested four Germans, six Belgians, four Frenchmen, two Italians, three Austrians and an American. Please advise immediately who we are at war with.”²

The Bible's answer to that question may surprise you. Man's enemy is sin. Self-centeredness ravages our hearts. From the very beginning the wages of self-centeredness has been death. “A man reaps what he sows.” (Gal. 6:7) If you sow seeds of peace, you

² Ibid, p. 1574

reap the fruits of peace. But sow seeds of destruction and the result is destruction.
“...those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same.” (Job 4:8)

War is a fruit of sin.

The Bible does not isolate war, as if it were something unique and quite apart from other human struggles. International combat resides in the same neighborhood with rape, murder, wife-beating, husband-berating, loneliness, arrogance: these are the fruits of sin.

War is one of them. On a larger scale, no doubt. In a more terrible form, certainly. But war with Iraq is born in the same hospital as a quarrel with your neighbor. The hospital of sin.

Before we blame international conflict on finances or boundaries or religion, we must lay the blame where God does: our sinful nature. “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? (James 4:1)

It’s not so much that war is sin, but that war is a consequence of sin, a result of the lust and desires that wage war within us. James goes on to say:

“You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.” (James 4:2)

A boy once asked, “Daddy, how do wars begin?”

“Well, take the first world war. It began when Germany invaded Belgium.” Immediately his wife interrupted him, “Tell the boy the truth. It began because somebody was murdered.” The husband yanked his head toward her, “Are you answering this question or am I?” She walked out of the room in a huff- the dad sat and scowled. The boy interrupted the silence, “Daddy, you don’t have to tell me how wars begin. I think I know how.”

Whether it’s two toddlers fighting in a playroom or two super-powers directing nuclear missiles at each other; the cause of conflict is the same. Selfishness. One side cannot get what they want so they demand their way. They fight. War is the fruit of sin.

To ask God to prohibit war, then, is to ask him to prohibit the consequence of human behavior. Something he has never been wont to do. As long as there is sin there will be war.

War is a tool of God.

There are many unacceptable reasons for war. Imperialism. Financial gain. Religion. Family feuds. Racial arrogance. There are many unacceptable motives for war. But there is one time when war is condoned and used by God: wickedness. When calling the Israelites into battle. Moses carefully instructed them:

"After the Lord your God has done this for you, don't say to yourselves, 'The Lord has given us this land because we are so righteous!' No, it is because of the wickedness of the other nations that he is doing it." (Deut. 9:4)

Can people grow so wicked, so pagan, so vile that God justifiably destroys them? Can leaders be so evil and cruel that God, knowing the hardness of their hearts, righteously removes them from the earth? Apparently so. He did so with Sodom and Gomorrah. He did so with the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites.

"As for the towns of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as a special possession, destroy every living thing in them. You must completely destroy the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, just as the Lord your God has commanded you. This will keep the people of the land from teaching you their detestable customs in the worship of their gods, which would cause you to sin deeply against the Lord your God." (Deut. 20:16-18)

God has used warfare as a form of judgment against the enemies of God. In fact, He uses warfare as judgment against his own people when they become enemies of God.

"O Israel, I will bring a distant nation against you," says the Lord. "It is a mighty nation, an ancient nation, a people whose language you do not know, whose speech you cannot understand. Their weapons are deadly; their warriors are mighty. They will eat your harvests and your children's bread, your flocks of sheep and your herds of cattle. Yes, they will eat your grapes and figs. And they will destroy your fortified cities, which you think are so safe." (Jeremiah 5:15-17)

God's priority is the salvation of souls. When a people-group blockades his plan, does he not have the right to remove them? He is the God who knows "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10). He knows the hearts of men and protects his people by punishing the evil of their wicked neighbors. Is it not God's right to punish evil? Is it not appropriate for the one who tells us to hate that which is evil to punish that which is evil? Of course it is.

And--this is crucial--he uses governments to do so.

"Obey the government, for God is the one who put it there. All governments have been placed in power by God. . . . The authorities are sent by God to help you. But if

you are doing something wrong, of course you should be afraid, for you will be punished. The authorities are established by God for that very purpose, to punish those who do wrong.” (Romans 13:1,4)

Scripture elevates the role of government to a high place. Their position is a God-given assignment. Paul echoes this truth three times:

All governments have been placed in power by God.

The authorities are sent by God.

The authorities are established by God.

The noun Paul employs for “authorities” is *diakonoi*- the same word from which we translate *deacon*. Those in authority, the President, the soldiers, Secretary of Defense and so forth, are God’s deacons and deaconesses--as ordained for their task as is any preacher or evangelist.

Their role is clear: protect and punish. Protect the innocent and punish evil. When the government perceives that her people are under threat, when negotiations have proven fruitless and olive branches have gone unacknowledged, when the leaders of a country are convinced that an attack against evil will preserve that which is good and protect those who are innocent--then, and only then, war is justifiable.

War is divinely delegated to government.

Somebody once asked Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, “Where was God when the Nazis were about to overrun Europe?” Sartre replied, “Where was man?”³ He seems to have been asking, ‘Why did we delay?’ What if we had acted sooner? And, once we did react, was the attack not justified? Was it not right to overthrow Hitler’s attempt at genocide? Was justice not served in the liberation of the American slaves? Would we be better off if we had ignored the tactics of Mussolini or dismissed the attack of Japan in 1941?

Unpunished evil is, itself, evil.

But what of the teachings of Jesus? What about a passage like Luke 6:27-31

"But if you are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for the happiness of those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other cheek. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. Give what you have to anyone who asks you for it; and when

³ Palau, Luis Where is God When Bad Things Happen- p. 209 Galilee Press

things are taken away from you, don't try to get them back. Do for others as you would like them to do for you.”(Luke 6:27-31)

Have we stumbled upon an inconsistency? Do we find God calling for war one time and “cheek-turning” another? Is this a double standard? I don't think so.

The government is called to turn the other cheek. We call this diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise. If such efforts prove fruitless, and if the leaders feel their constituency is under threat, they can then take steps to protect the innocent.

Consider this truth from a personal standpoint. If someone criticizes me, I am called to “turn the other cheek.” I forgive. But what if they criticize my wife and daughters. What if they threaten them? What if a perpetrator tells me he is coming after my family? What do I do?

Simple, I protect the innocent. I take steps to insure their safety.

But, Max. aren't you called to love your enemies? Absolutely. And I will love him in jail.

Why? Because, to leave my family unprotected would be to abdicate my responsibility as family leader. It is a higher evil to let evil go unpunished than to punish those who would harm innocents.

Has the United States reached such a point with Saddam Hussein? Only the authorities of a nation can answer that question. But if they perceive a real and present danger, their godly response is to protect the country.

I agree with the view of C.S. Lewis.

Does loving your enemy mean not punishing him? No, for loving myself does not mean that I ought not to subject myself to punishment—even to death. If you had committed a murder, the right Christian thing to do would be to give yourself up to the police and be hanged. It is, therefore, in my opinion, perfectly right for a Christian judge to sentence a man to death or a Christian soldier to kill an enemy. I always have thought so, ever since I became a Christian, and long before the war, and I still think so now that we are at peace. It is no good quoting ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ There are two Greek words: the ordinary word to kill and the word to murder. And when Christ quotes that commandment he uses the murder one in all three accounts, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And I am told there is the same distinction in Hebrew. All killing is not murder any more than all sexual intercourse is adultery. When soldiers came to St. John the Baptist asking what to do, he never remotely suggested that they ought to leave the army: nor did Christ when he met a Roman

sergeant-major—what they called a centurion. The idea of the knight—the Christian in arms for the defence of a good cause—is one of the great Christian ideas. War is a dreadful thing, and I can respect an honest pacifist, though I think he is entirely mistaken.”⁴

Again, the purpose of war is to punish the wicked and protect the innocent. Where does that leave us? That leaves us on our knees.

“I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. As you make your requests, plead for God's mercy upon them, and give thanks. Pray this way for kings and all others who are in authority, so that we can live in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity. . . . So wherever you assemble, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God, free from anger and controversy.” (1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8)

If ever we need to trust the promise of Romans 8:28, it is times like these:

“ And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” (Romans 8:28)

Remember these key thoughts:

1. War is always dreadful--while never God's ideal, war has been God's idea.
2. War is justifiable only when other alternatives to protect the innocent have been exhausted. War is God's righteous last resort.
3. War is divinely delegated to the government, God's ministers who are called to protect the innocent and punish the evil.
4. A moral war is limited, not universal; national, not personal; defensive, not aggressive.

The role of a Christian, in such a time, is prayer:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:12)

Let us pray for our President and those in authority. Let us give thanks for our President who begins his day on his knees with an open Bible in his lap. And, let us pray for a speedy end to this conflict.

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⁴ C. S. Lewis: Mere Christianity. San Francisco: HarperCollins 1952, pp. 118-119.