

Asking Our Hard Questions of the Bible

March 27, 2006

God and War

I. Introduction

A. Announcements

1. Open with prayer
2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions OK for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
5. Read passages (volunteers)

B. Does anyone have any questions for us to consider for next time?

1. .
2. .

C. During the Vietnam War era there was a popular song by Edwin Starr that strongly expressed the feelings of many. In the refrain he fairly shouted, “War; what is it good for? Absolutely nothing!” For those who lived through or remember the war against Hitler and Tojo, that sentiment certainly seemed to be, at minimum, an overstatement.

1. But, whether necessary or not, wars and genocide are certainly among the worst things we can experience on this earth.
2. Today there is the genocidal war in Sudan (Darfur and the south), and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Columbia, parts of the Philippines, civil wars in several African countries, and the seemingly endless battle between Israel and the Palestinians.
3. Whenever we see such things happening or live through them ourselves, it’s only natural to wonder, “Why are all these wars going on? What is God thinking and doing about it all?”
4. Is God *causing* them? Or is God simply incapable or unwilling to stop them? Do they serve some mysterious larger purpose, or are they just random and out of control?
5. These are important questions. Dick Nailen sent me some Bible references that deal with them, and we will look at some of them tonight as we try to sort out the answers.

II. There are many aspects to this question—too many to deal with them all tonight. So as we focus on what the Bible says about the wars of ancient Israel and then consider the implications for us today.

A. We will be asking essentially three hard questions:

1. “What role did God play in the wars of Israel?”
2. “Why didn’t God do something about them?”

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3. “What is the lesson for us today?”
- B. We will use **Lamentations 3:38** as our central focus, but to see the pattern we will first briefly look at some other selections.
 1. **Isaiah 31:1-3** (v.2 “Yet [God] also is wise and will bring disaster And does not retract His words, But will arise against the house of evildoers And against the help of the workers of iniquity.”)
 2. **2nd Chronicles 36:15-21** (God “brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans [Babylonians]” because they “kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets.”)
 3. **Isaiah 47:11** “But evil will come on you Which you will not know how to charm away; and disaster will fall on you for which you cannot atone; And destruction about which you do not know will come on you suddenly.”
 4. And now let’s read our focus passage for this study: **Lamentations 3:37-39**. (We will be moving around a lot in the Bible today, but keep Lamentations 3 marked because we will return to it time and again.)
- III. First we need to know the historical context as the background for “Lamentations.”
 - A. For the sad story that was the reason “Lamentations” was written, let’s back a few pages to Jeremiah 52. (Jeremiah quoted much of this from 2nd Kings 24.)
 1. Read (3 volunteers) **Jeremiah. 52:1-6**,
 - a. **Jeremiah 7-11**,
 - b. **Jeremiah 12-15**
 2. After the time of King Solomon (the son and successor of King David), Israel had been divided into two kingdoms: The northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.
 3. It was Judah that contained the city of Jerusalem, and of course, the temple of God built by Solomon.
 4. Israel had been conquered and destroyed in 721 BC by the Assyrians; 10 of Israel’s original 12 tribes disappeared from history after that. Only the tribes of Judah and a gradually disappearing remnant of Benjamin remained as the southern kingdom of Judah.
 5. There were times of revival, but like Israel before it, Judah fell into idolatry. In July 587 BC its king (Zedekiah) was captured by the Babylonians, and the next month Jerusalem and the temple were burned to the ground.
 - B. It certainly seemed that it was the end of everything.
 1. The people of God were killed, enslaved, or had fled.
 2. Israel and Judah were gone. The temple was gone. Hope itself seemed to be gone.
 3. Where was God? What had God done? What would God do?
 4. It was in this historical context that Lamentations was written.

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- C. Before we proceed to the literary context in Lamentations (i.e., context of the text itself), It is very important to pay attention first to the *type* of writing it is. This is not written as a history or narrative, nor as a teaching (didactic) passage. It is poetry, and we need to be careful how we read it.
- Poems are filled with metaphors and other imagery that are designed to convey ideas and feelings, but not necessarily to describe actual physical reality.
 - For example, let's read a single verse from a poetic section of Isaiah:
 - Isaiah 55:12.** "You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands." (NIV)
 - Unless there is a very weird earthquake and wind storm, something else is meant. What is the poetry telling us? (Idea/emotion is one of widespread joy.)
 - So, as we read Lamentations, let's look for the ideas and emotions and be careful not to treat this as a narrative of events exactly as they happened.
- D. Now we are ready to look at the literary context of our passage. To get the flavor of it, let's read and talk about a few selections.
- Lam. 1:1-3** (discuss meaning/idea & emotion: mourning over destruction and loss)
 - Lam. 2:1-3** (discuss meaning/idea & emotion: God is seen as the one who destroyed the nation)
 - Lam. 2:17** (discuss meaning/idea & emotion: God had warned and now carried out what he had warned against.)
 - Where/when was the warning? (Dt. 28:15ff)
 - Moses: cursing/blessing **Dt. 30:15-18, Dt. 31:16-17**
 - Lam. 2:18-19** (discuss meaning/idea & emotion: turn to God for help.)
 - Why? Shouldn't they be lambasting God?
 - The "Why me, God?" response is common and what we have come to expect when there are disasters.
 - But it shows a lack of faith in God (i.e., God has abandoned me or God won't help me through this), and it presupposes that we don't deserve to have bad things happen. Is that true?
 - Was that true for the people of Judah?
 - In chapter 3, the voice changes to 1st Person ("I"). Remember, this is poetry. In this chapter, we are given an "eyewitness" account as if the city of Jerusalem or the whole of Judah itself were speaking. It begins by telling again of the horror that has happened.

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- a. **Lamentations 3:1-2**
 - b. **Lamentations 3:10-11**
 - c. **Lamentations 3:16-17**
6. Suddenly the tone changes dramatically in vv. **21-24** (the steadfast love of the Lord . . .)
- a. And there is another strong statement of faith in vv. **31-33**.
 - b. This repeats the message of hope, faith, and perseverance we found in 2:18-19
- E. Now that we have a good grasp of both the historical and literary contexts, let's turn to our key passage for our study. **Read 3:34-39**
1. Faced with the destruction of the nation and people of God, there are 3 possible ways to understand what happened and God's part in it:
 - a. Either God had abandoned the God's specially chosen people,
 - b. Or God was surprised or overcome and could not defend his people,
 - c. Or God had allowed or even caused the disaster.
 2. From the passages we have read tonight, or others that come to mind, how does the Bible answer the question, "What role did God play in the destruction?"
 3. If "a." or "b.," then God would not be God and would not be reliable. Let's just look at a couple of short selections from Isaiah and one from the NT.
 - a. Isaiah 49:14-16a (Can a mother forget her nursing infant? God will never forget you)
 - b. Isaiah 44:21-23 (You will not be forgotten. I have redeemed you.)
Prophetic passage that looks forward to the redemption through Jesus.
 - c. Isaiah 45:5-7 (No other god. None can surprise or overcome God.)
 - d. Matthew 28:20 Jesus "with you always to end of age."
 4. This much is becoming pretty clear. God didn't walk away and God wasn't surprised or overcome.
 5. The only possibility of the three that is left is that God either allowed or caused the attack and destruction of Judah.
- IV. That is precisely the problem for us. We want to know: how can God be the cause of such violence?
- A. After all, it was God who said "Do not murder. Do not steal." God gave many laws against rape, assault, and violence of every kind. Jesus even said that calling someone a fool was wrong, because in that common insult lay the seed of murder.
1. Yet here and many places in the OT, it seems that God is condoning all of those things on a massive scale.
 2. There must be something we're missing. And there is.

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- B. First of all, in our Lamentations passage, we must again remember this is poetry and not be too literal in our understanding of what it means.
1. Notice the phrase “Good and Bad” in 3:38. It is common to find in the Bible phrases like this having two opposites connected by “and.” It is a way of saying “this and that and everything in between.”
 2. Jesus is called the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. It means he encompasses all things.
 3. The implication is that we should not be too dogmatic here. Saying good and bad come from the mouth of God is a statement that God is in control of all things even when they seem terrible. It is NOT a statement that God is directly responsible for the destruction.
 4. In fact, God holds Babylon to account for its vicious attack on Judah.
 - a. **Jeremiah 51:1-8**
 - b. Notice the statement that God has not forgotten Israel and Judah (5).
 - c. Also see the warning to flee (6) and the desire to heal Babylon (8).
- C. Secondly, we need to remember ancient Israel’s unique relationship—contract—with God.
1. God had made a special covenant/contract with Abraham that Abraham and his descendants would be God’s representatives on earth. (Genesis 12:1)
 2. God renewed it with Abraham’s son Isaac (Gen. 26:1-4), who passed it on to his son Jacob (Gen. 31:26-29), and God ratified it again (Gen. 35:9-13).
 3. Jacob and his small tribe became a nation after clan moved to Egypt during a great famine and his son Joseph became Pharaoh’s top assistant.
 4. When they left Egypt as fleeing slaves freed by God, the covenant was renewed yet again on a grander scale at Mt. Sinai. We read earlier some passages in which Moses presented this contract to the people and they heartily agreed. (**Deut. 30:15-18, Deut. 31:16-17**).
 5. This national relationship with God is unique in all of human history. With that great privilege came equally great responsibility.
- D. There is a third factor, related to this, that we must also take into account.
1. Ancient Israel was a sort of theocracy, though after choosing its first king, Saul, it was no longer directly ruled by God.
 2. Originally, there was supposed to be a separation of some functions between the king and the priest, but that was blurred after the time of Solomon, the 3rd king.
 3. Increasingly the king held power over the religious law of the land. If the king was faithful to God, idols were smashed and pagan practices were punished. But if the king took up pagan worship, it was promoted and the

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- temple of God would be neglected. God's prophets would then be persecuted.
4. In short, as went the king, so went the nation. It was a society of clans and tribes, and decisions were made for all by their leaders. Today's individualism was virtually unknown, except as an anti-social aberration.
 5. In such a culture it would be expected that what happened to the leaders would happen to the followers. Again, as happened to the king would happen to the nation.
 6. There are many places the Bible describes how the nation fell into sin because the king turned from God. Here are a couple of examples:
 - a. 2nd Chron. 12:1-4
 - b. 2nd Kings 21:1-6
 - c. There are many more, especially in 2nd Chronicles and 2nd Kings
- E. Let's summarize
1. In Lamentations and elsewhere we see that God is in complete control (i.e., both "good" and "bad.")
 2. Israel had a unique covenant with God to represent God among the nations of the ancient world. They had clearly been told both the benefits of faith and the judgements of apostasy.
 3. When Israel's leaders turned to paganism, so did the people.
- V. What about us? Does this apply to modern America as it did to ancient Israel? Are America and other countries subject to the same cycles of destruction and restoration as was ancient Israel?
- A. We should not be too quick to answer that question either yes or no.
1. Before we might say "yes," for example we should remember that we don't have the same national relationship with God that Israel had.
 2. We don't have a national covenant directly with God like Israel did at Mt. Sinai.
 3. And we certainly are not a theocracy of any kind.
- B. But on the other hand, let's not be too quick to say "no" either.
1. Babylon, for example, didn't have a special covenantal relationship with God, yet they were punished for their destruction of Judah.
 2. The small nations that were in the Promised Land before Joshua led Israel in to replace them had no special covenant with God either. Yet the Bible tells us they were destroyed because their sin had reached its fullness. (Gen 15:13-16)
 3. And we know from the Bible, too, that God doesn't change standards to fit in with the mood of different human times and cultures.
 4. So, we shouldn't be too confident today that any other nations like ours might get an exemption from God.
- C. Yet there is one overwhelming fact that does make a difference.

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1. Ancient Israel was the nation that would produce the Messiah—Jesus Christ. That was its God-given purpose.
 2. Until Christ came, Israel was supposed to present and represent God's presence on earth. Therefore, the attitude of other people and nations to Israel, later more narrowly focused down to Judah, was similar to an attitude towards the promised Messiah.
 3. But now the Messiah has come. Our relationship with God is neither mediated through—nor affected by—Israel or Judah, but through Jesus.
 4. In the person of Jesus Christ, perfection has come and has supplanted the imperfect nation that preceded him.
 5. That takes away the major reason for God's wars for and against ancient Israel/Judah.
- D. We have no known prophets now like in the times the Bible records.
1. So we've no way of knowing for certain whether God favors or opposes one nation or another in any conflict.
 2. We can use our best judgement, informed by the Bible, our Christian faith, and prayer. But we should be very, very careful about presuming to speak for God whether about a war or any other matter that God has not already made clear.
 3. We only know this for certain: that the Bible tells us there will be a final conflict (perhaps we are in it now)—a conflict that is essentially a war against God—and that Jesus will return to put an end to that war and all wars forever.
- VI. In conclusion, we have found that the Bible makes two points that we can easily get confused.
- A. First, God is God and there is no other.
1. God is Lord of all and nothing happens that is outside of God's control.
 2. Second, acts of destruction are the responsibility of the people who commit them and we will be held to account.
- B. How do we reconcile these?
1. Is God to be held to blame, because God is in control?
 - a. No. God is the creator of all things and has the absolute right to do with creation as God sees fit. (You are the potter, we are the clay. Isaiah 64:8)
 - b. And God has made it clear that no one is ever forced into obedience.
 2. But if God is in overall control, aren't people to be excused for doing what God supposedly intended for us to do? No, because we do it of our own free will, even eagerly as evidenced by our willingness to go beyond the boundaries of God's law.

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3. The remaining, reasonable conclusion is that God *allows* societal disasters such as wars to restrain one society or another; to reform or remove them.
 - a. But God does not enjoy or want them to happen.
 - b. It may be a “necessary evil” in a world corrupted by sin.
 - c. Or more certainly, simply the inevitable result of the sin of human beings and human societies.
 - d. At its worst, war is a disaster for everyone. And at its best, it can only be a temporary “band-aid” fix awaiting the final Judgment and return of Christ when wars will end and all things will be made new.

VII. Summary

- A. Our goal today was to learn what the Bible does/does not tell us about wars and God’s involvement with them.
 1. Have we done that satisfactorily?
 2. Have these studies been helpful?
- B. How does what we have studied apply to each of us?
- C. What questions for next time?
- D. Any comments on our format or subject matter so far?
- E. Next meeting: Monday April 24th, 7-8:30 p. m.
- F. Close in prayer
- G. **Archives of class notes can be found online at:**
www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa