

Kenmore Baptist Church Message Outline 5/6/11 AM/PM (LOGOS)  
GOD'S TWO HANDS: Making Sense of Divine Violence<sup>1</sup>

## Troubling Stories and a Bloody God

Osama may be gone, but religiously motivated violence still shakes the world. Many people rightly wonder if the real issue traces back to religious texts themselves.

Perhaps terror is in the mind of God? The Bible (especially the Old Testament) is dripping with divinely sanctioned violence. Most jarring of all is herem, "the ban": dedicate the enemy entirely to God in utter destruction ... kill everything.

Side-steps won't do:

"This is an Old Testament problem; Jesus fixes it in the New."

"These battles are a beautiful allegory of spiritual warfare."

What are we to make of divine violence?

How do God's justice and mercy relate?

How can anyone trust this bipolar God, forcing one minute and forgiving the next—the left and right hand seemingly taking turns?

How do we integrate Joshua conquering Jericho with Jesus forgiving Jerusalem?



## Joshua and Jericho

Does God condone genocide? Is He okay with ethnic cleansing?

What about the Canaanites? How could God command the killing of people?

## From Slum dog to Millionaire

- ◆ Israel were the underdogs, redeemed slaves sensitive to being oppressed foreigners (Deuteronomy 10:17–19)
- ◆ Israel's election was not because of merit. God chooses the few to bless the many, which first requires that the few are preserved in the midst of violent neighbours
- ◆ Israel inherited the land because of Canaanite wickedness (Deuteronomy 9:4–6)

## Guilty, not innocent

Herem means that everything was utterly destroyed—men, women, young, old, and even the animals. What, then, of the innocent?

- ◆ Could all the perfect people raise their hand? (Romans 3:23; 6:23)

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<sup>1</sup>To continue the conversation, download the Small Group Discussion Guide (including full manuscript, activities and questions, extra fact sheets, and recommended reading) from <http://logos.kbc.org.au/blog/resources/logos-talks/gods-two-hands/>.

- ◆ We all fall short of our own standards and conscience, let alone God's holy law
- ◆ The young are likely saved on the day of final judgment (cf. Deuteronomy 1:39)
- ◆ We are all interconnected, a part of the whole. God deemed corporate judgment for their collective cultural sin as fitting and necessary to halt corruption
- ◆ We cannot "play God", but—as the Creator of all—it is right for God to "play God" ... there is nothing patently immoral about the Creator of life taking away this gift
- ◆ God's actions derive from a perfect character working toward the greatest good for all creation. At times this will require the taking of life to set things right

Does sin deserve to be punished?

Even if God has the right to take life, did the Canaanites really deserve their final fate?

- ◆ Do Hitler, Martin Bryant, and Josef Fritzl deserve punishment? If so, how much?
- ◆ If God is real, then who is more capable of weighing right punishment to fit the bill?
- ◆ Canaan mirrored its violent, sexualised idols: child sacrifice, incest, bestiality, and cultic prostitution (Leviticus 18). After nearly 500 years of longsuffering and warning of judgment, offering reprieve if they would turn, God justly exercised His right hand upon this perverted culture
- ◆ This was not arbitrary punishment. Divine violence fit within a moral framework
- ◆ Parents aren't held to the same standards as their children. Likewise, it is God's prerogative to parent and judge His creation in ways we (apart from divine mandate) cannot. And we have reason to trust He will make such decisions in accordance with perfect knowledge of justice, even if we struggle with the details
- ◆ By what standard—apart from God—do we judge God as a "moral monster"? If morality is merely a biological impulse for survival, then it has no ultimate claim on my allegiance. Yet even our moral sense that God is 'unjust' is paradoxically a pointer to our common objective morality, courtesy of a common creator

## Rahab's Scarlet Thread

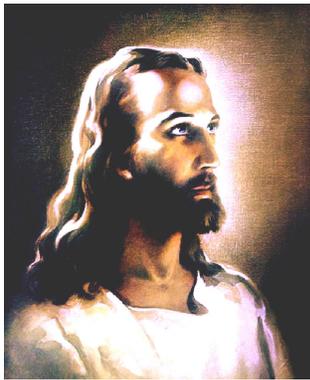
In Ezekiel 18: 21-23, God says: "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"

God's right and left hand—His wrath and mercy—always come together in love. He will rightly judge the rebels, but His deepest desire is to offer mercy and grace—fresh life—to all who repent. As such, even as Deuteronomy records herem, it speaks of caring for the animals and livestock, acting justly and kindly to all travellers and foreigners, freeing and caring for the slaves. God's commands are clothed with mercy and grace, and His offer of forgiveness is extended to all—even the Canaanites.

- ◆ Rahab knew about YHWH and put trust in Him to be saved from God's right hand
- ◆ God extends His left hand to individuals and nations, like Nineveh (cf. Jonah)

- ◆ This is God's message, the scarlet thread in His tapestry of redemption
- ◆ Rahab the Canaanite was an ancestor of Jesus the Saviour. She joined the line of those blessed to be a blessing to the nations
- ◆ It all starts with God protecting Israel from violent cultures, offering a safe place to grow up, so that when they're mature, they truly will save the world. That is their job. They are moving towards the true and better Joshua. Canaan is just one step on the road to the cross. Enter Yeshua—Jesus the Christ, riding into Jerusalem.

## Jesus and Jerusalem



Would the real Jesus please stand up? Pastel Jesus wouldn't hurt a fly, while revolutionary Jesus wouldn't comfort the afflicted. Yet Christ is the complete Saviour, the true image of the invisible God: left and right hand in harmony.

Matthew 19:14; Luke 7:34; John 14:9  
Matthew 5:29; Mark 4:41



'Gentle Jesus meek and mild' never apologised for the blood and guts in the Old Testament. Instead, he claimed to fulfil the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17–19). Jesus was not, however, a walking contradiction. With Jesus, Israel had come of age and were now ready for their Saviour to lead them into the consummation of all their hopes—when their wrongdoing was covered, and they would walk in God's power and grace.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem blends the left and right hand in harmony, at once afflicting the comfortable, and comforting the afflicted (Matthew 21:14; 23:33, 37). The temple cleansing, followed by healing of the oppressed, is just one example. Israel wants ritual. But God desires justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

- ◆ Apathy, not anger, is the opposite of love. Jesus displayed righteous anger and zealous love. What parent does not care when one of his kids abuses another?
- ◆ Violent justice and tender mercy met at the cross. God holds the whole world in his hands ... plural. But this decisive expression of God's heart through Jesus' sacrifice settles it once and for all: we worship a left-handed God (Luke 23:34)
- ◆ God's nail-pierced left-hand is open to the world. Yet He will not force His love upon humanity. Ongoing rebellion will finally be met with judgment (John 3:16–18)

## Tough Love: Our Response to God's Two Hands

In a fallen world where free creatures can abuse each other, some degree of violence is necessary. Protecting with the Right is an act of love—not to be naïvely dismissed.

But this does not open the door for Christians to justify religious violence. We worship a slain lamb, whose decisive manoeuvre was to overcome evil with good, and absorb sin in love. Love ultimately wins, and mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2). Because we know that God will rightly rule at the end (Romans 12:19), we can Lead with the Left now, as peace-makers and agents of reconciliation in the present. This is our prerogative.

And how should we respond to this kind of God? To paraphrase John the Baptist, "Repent! For the kingdom of God has TWO hands!" We need to seek forgiveness, because, like Israel, we've rebelled and have rejected the life-lines thrown to us.

God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love (Exodus 34:6f). Through Jesus we see that God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). So, like Lucy with Aslan, may we respectfully approach the throne of grace in our time of need.

God may not be safe, but He is good. He's the King I tell you.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What impacted you most in this talk?
2. "Religious violence today results from violent religious texts centred on a violent concept of God. Terror is in the mind of God." Your response?
3. Read over Joshua 6 as a group. With Logos' message in mind, how do you grapple with divine violence? Where is your (our) response strong, and where is it weak? The extra reading in the discussion guide will help with this (<http://logos.kbc.org.au/blog/resources/logos-talks/gods-two-hands/>)
4. How would you respond to the following questions: "Why did God choose Israel?"; "Can God kill the innocent?"; and "Does sin deserve to be punished?"
5. As a group, see how many examples of the "Scarlet Thread of Redemption" you can recall from across the Biblical story, especially in the more jarring Old Testament.
6. In what ways is Jesus' teaching and example continuous or discontinuous with the Divine Violence in the Old Testament. That is, how does Jesus do it the same, or differently?
7. What form do God's right and left hand take at Jesus' crucifixion? How do justice and mercy meet in love at the cross-beams?
8. Is violence necessary in a world like ours? And if so, what safeguards and resources does the Biblical story (centred on Jesus) offer to keep Christians from unnecessary violence, instead equipping us to be active peace-makers in a violent world?
9. God isn't 'safe' but He is 'good'. How will this shape your worship?
10. Using a recent newspaper, pray Jesus' love over our world's strife. Picture the cross planted in the midst of these violent conflicts, and seek how He wants you to respond.