

Prior to reading:

This sermon will conclude my messages on Samson over the past months. Today, we'll re-read some of the gory details of that story and a few additional passages. We may wonder why the God we know as a good God allows and at times even instructs and enables his servants to do evil things to other people. Is he the God of love or the God of genocide? That's our concern today.

Let's pray together and then read from the Word.

**Judges 14:19** Then the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him (Samson). He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of everything and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he returned to his father's home.

**Judges 15:3** Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them."<sup>4</sup> So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails,<sup>5</sup> lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.<sup>6</sup> When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his companion." So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death.<sup>7</sup> Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I swear that I won't stop until I get my revenge on you."<sup>8</sup> He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.

**Judges 15:14** As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands.<sup>15</sup> Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.

**Judges 16:21** Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison.<sup>22</sup> **But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.**

<sup>23</sup> Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands."

<sup>24</sup> When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain."

<sup>25</sup> While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them.

When they stood him among the pillars, <sup>26</sup> Samson said to the servant who held his hand, “Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them.” <sup>27</sup> Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. <sup>28</sup> Then Samson prayed to the Lord, “Sovereign Lord, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.” <sup>29</sup> Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, <sup>30</sup> Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

So ends the story of Samson. Clearly there is lots of killing done by this man who was a servant of God. Now let’s hear just one verse from Hosea, another rather graphic verse.

**Hosea 13:16** The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open.”

And finally, we turn to the New Testament book of Hebrews and read from chapter 12 beginning at v.18.

**Hebrews 12:18-29**

<sup>18</sup> You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; <sup>19</sup> to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, <sup>20</sup> because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” <sup>21</sup> The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

<sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

<sup>25</sup> See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? <sup>26</sup> At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” <sup>27</sup> The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

<sup>28</sup> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup> for our “God is a consuming fire.”

**This is the Word of the Lord.**

Dear Congregation,

It's one thing to ask why God doesn't stop evil from happening. Why didn't he stop floods from destroying large parts of BC last year or the forest fires in Alberta 5 years ago that destroyed Fort MacMurray? We can ponder why he doesn't stop Vladimir Putin from continuing his war on Ukraine and taking so many lives? Our question today, though, is different in that we are wondering why God sometimes deliberately is involved in evil. It's not that he doesn't stop it. It's that he actually sanctions and even commands it.

As we've reviewed Samson's life, we can rightly ask, what are we supposed to think of God when we read Judges 14:19?

*Jdg 14:19 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon (Samson) in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle.*

This is the Spirit of God who empowers Samson to kill people. And the same Spirit comes upon Samson time and again and he kills more and more people. These kinds of passages trouble all of us to some degree—or at least should. Atheists and agnostics might point to these things as reasons not to believe in God at all or certainly not the God of the Bible.

Author Mark Buchanan, in a *Christianity Today* article wrote, "...it's hard to stick to the claim that God is love—unconditional love, love that seeks and serves and suffers and gives until it hurts. It's hard to reconcile the New Covenant God revealed in Jesus Christ, who welcomes little children, eats with sinners, speaks peace to troubled hearts, calls us to love our enemies, and lets adulterers walk away unscathed, with the Old Covenant God, who lays waste to entire cities, lets babies be dashed on rocks, opens the earth to swallow families whole, smites his own priests for just touching holy relics, and encourages parents to stone their own children for acting up." As David Lamb says, "even committed Christians wonder what God was thinking" when we read about such things.

Let me start by saying there is probably no completely satisfying answer for us on this side of heaven. But that shouldn't deter us from trying to wrestle with the Bible to find at least some answers to why a loving God allows and even instructs and empowers his people to kill others.

## **Traditional Answers**

There are traditional answers to this problem of God and genocide which are helpful. I acknowledge that I got a lot of this info from a course I took by Dr. Bill Webb and the writings of Dr. Mark Buchanan, asking whether we can trust the God of genocide. The answers fall into two traditional camps: Not Real and Pristine Good. And then we'll look at a third answer as well.

### **1. Not Real**

**One** response to the Bible's atrocities is that they didn't really happen. They are simply hyperbole, which is something that is overstated to make an important

point. Jesus, for example, used hyperbole when said that if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! He didn't mean for us to literally do that. He meant for us to take serious action to battle our sin. So, when it comes to passages about killing Philistines or Canaanites, those are just overstated to make a point that something serious needed to happen.

This, of course, is a means of wishing away unpleasant things. While hyperbole is used in the Bible, that can't be the answer to every tough question we have with some Bible texts.

## **2. Pristine Good**

The better argument to make sense of passages that are hard to stomach is something called "Pristine Good." It simply means that there is some ultimate good that justifies the temporal wrong. God is up to something important that requires the drastic actions taken. There are three subcategories in this defense of God's involvement in the killing of people.

### **a. Higher Purpose**

The first approach is sometimes called "Higher Purpose." That basically says that God knows what he's doing. There's no problem with these passages. As Eugene Merrill puts it, "The issue... cannot be whether or not genocide is intrinsically good or evil—**its** sanction by a holy God settles that question." Merrill's conclusion is that if God is a holy God—"all that the Bible says he is, all that he does must be good—and that includes his authorization of genocide." We have limited human understanding, but God knows what he's doing.

It is argued here that "upper blesses lower". That means that something that achieves a greater end in the big picture of history justifies something wrong in a specific setting. So, it's okay for Samson to kill Philistines because in the end his actions are all about protecting Israel. Israel needs to be preserved because Jesus is going to be born from Israel. This is God's greatest good. Jesus will take the punishment for our sins so we can all be saved. Therefore killing Philistines is okay because it will mean the salvation of millions—even billions—of Christians, by the grace of God. That's God's higher purpose.

### **b. No Innocent Victims**

Second is the "no innocent victims" rationale. The Philistines in the book of Judges, just like all the Canaanites in the book of Joshua, were not innocent victims of atrocities by Samson. For example, the Canaanites sacrificed their children to Molech. That was a hideous practice worthy of judgment from God. In reference to Samson, then, the argument is that the Philistines also did wrong. The Philistine leaders threatened Samson's wife and her family with death if she didn't get Samson to tell her the meaning of his riddle. These same leaders did not honour their own laws and promises. Samson married his Philistine wife in a 100% legal ceremony but she was given away to his best man after the wedding.

Moreover, those leaders killed their own people without just cause and burned down their houses, as we read.

Given the atrocities of the Philistines, Samson is justified in burning their crops and killing their people. The Philistines were wicked people. They had blood on their hands. They were not innocent victims of an unjust act by Samson or by God. So if the Spirit of the Lord comes on Samson and he kills many of them, that's what they have coming. They are not innocent.

### **c. Foreshadowing of Judgment Day**

That brings us to the third “pristine good” rationale used for justifying Old Testament genocides: that “Holy War is a Foreshadowing of the Final Judgment.” Theologian Tremper Longman III says,

...the punishment for sin is death. The lesson that rebellion ... leads to death is made clear in the Garden of Eden. It is only because of God's extraordinary grace that Adam and Eve were not killed on the spot when they ate the fruit of the tree. Indeed, it is because of that grace that *any of us* breathe. ...we should **not** be amazed that God ordered the death of the Canaanites, but rather we should stand in amazement that *he lets anyone live*.

So the scholars in this camp say that “the actions of biblical holy war are justified because the ...destruction of the Canaanites”—and likewise the Philistines in relation to Samson—“functions as a preview of the final judgment.” (Webb) These killings are reminders to us that God is just and we all deserve to die as much as the Philistines. Samson serves as a type of judge to remind us that one day we will all be judged by God. And apart from Christ, we'll be found wanting and therefore worthy of ultimate judgment on Judgment Day.

In summary, these three “pristine good” arguments help us understand that everyone is guilty of sinning against God; God is up to something greater that we can't fully understand, but his actions are moving history in his direction. Ultimate good justifies some temporal wrong because God is working toward righting all wrongs.

### **3. Drive us to Christ**

That brings us to our third way to make sense of the genocide passages. And I'd say this is the most important thing they do: they drive us to Christ.

One of the things we often do in looking at the stories of Samson's rage and revenge and God's command to kill the enemies is to make a false distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. The former is vengeful, and the latter is loving. Rather than setting up this false and unhelpful distinction, we need to see Jesus as the key to understanding this problem. Here the book of Hebrews is helpful. It starts out in Hebrews 1:1&2 saying,

*Heb 1:1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...*

Over its 13 chapters, the writer of Hebrews builds a compelling case for Jesus' complete solidarity with frail and sinful humans and yet his utter superiority over everything that breathes—over angels, prophets, high priests, Moses and also Samson. "In the past" is one of the book's refrains. "But now" is another. In the past, God spoke and acted through prophets, through angels, through priests, through Moses and Samson. But now, God speaks and acts through his Son, Jesus, who is superior to all others—who, indeed, is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

In other words, Jesus reveals God like no other. Jesus speaks for God like no other, says Mark Buchanan.

...In every way, Jesus... is superior to whomever and whatever has come before him. The past is a mere shadow of Christ's present reality and future glory.

Hebrews sees no contrast in God. There is no Old Covenant versus New Covenant God. There is no God of Moses (and Samson) versus God of Jesus. [They are the same God.]

All of this ties together as Hebrews wends toward its conclusion. The contrast between past and present, Moses and Jesus, Old and New rises to a brilliant crescendo in Jesus. Listen again to these verses from Hebrews 12:

*Heb 12:18 You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm...*

*Heb 12:22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:18–24)*

“Jesus ushers in a new day and a new way. In the past, we trembled before this God. But now we can approach him with joy, with confidence, with singing. We can approach him because of Jesus who satisfies the wrath of God, the judgment of God on our sin, and offers us grace instead.”

God is the same God in both Old and New Testaments. But Jesus is the cure to all that's wrong with the world. God has patiently been bringing his plan of salvation to fulfillment. Judgments have happened and they still will happen. But all who come under Christ are saved.

But it doesn't stop there, friends. Here's a surprise, says Buchanan: "The road is even steeper now, the judgment of God sterner, and the cost of refusal greater." Listen to what Hebrews 12 says to us:

*Heb 12:25 See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? . . . <sup>28</sup> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup>for our "God is a consuming fire."*

Do you see it, brothers and sisters? Here in the NT too God is described in ways that sound more Old Testament—he's a consuming fire! But when we look at Christ and believe in him the wrath of God is satisfied. Buchanan writes, At the Cross, God's own wrath falls on God. The God of the Old Covenant meets himself in the Christ of the New Covenant, and in a way superior to everything that has come before, he enacts a deep and lasting reconciliation.

## **Conclusion**

So to conclude, then, we don't want to dismiss the genocide passages of the Bible saying that they aren't real, that they were just stories to make a point. Nor do we simply want to plead ignorance saying that God is up to something good but we just can't understand it.

The truth is that we don't understand all the details but we do understand what God is up to. God in Christ is reconciling the sinful world to himself. He knows what he's doing and we must admit that sin has brought a lot of ugliness into our world. And God has had the difficult task of cleaning up our mess.

Therefore, what we really need to dwell on is Jesus. Just like in Sunday School, Jesus is the answer!

The article I've quoted from earlier gave this lengthy but helpful illustration about something called nail houses:

A worldwide phenomenon started in China about a decade ago. It's called a nail house—a house whose owner refuses to sell to developers. That refusal forces the developers to excavate and build around the house, often leaving it perched starkly, stubbornly, precipitously, on some rickety pedestal of earth.

They're called nail houses because, in the scraped bald landscape over which they loom, they resemble a nail that never got hammered down. Pixar made an entire movie a few years back called *Up*, about just such a house and its crotchety, defiant, ancient owner.

In almost every instance, the developer gets a court order to demolish the house.

So a nail house is an act of doomed resistance. It's a gesture of hopeless defiance. It's a desperate last attempt to resist the irresistible, to stop the unstoppable, to defeat the undefeatable. It's a lone fist shaken against a ruthless destroyer.

The Bible is a book of nail houses. But unlike almost all the nail houses around the world, it comes with a message of wild hope: *Hold on! Don't give up! No matter how bleak it gets, how many fall to the right and the left, how inevitable your defeat seems, hold on! The high court of heaven rules in your favor. You win in the end.* Think, for instance, of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, or David and Goliath.

Think of even Samson defeating the Philistines in order to protect God's people from the enemy, including their own sin, and to preserve and redeem this people for God to come in Christ. So,

The ultimate nail house is the cross of Christ. That is history's most potent nail house, raised on a barren hillside in defiance of all the hellish despotism of the cosmos. And this time, the owner won.

But here's the strangeness of it: The Cross is mostly God's defiance of himself. God erects a nail house against his own wrath. What the Cross defies, what the Cross defeats, what the Cross pushes back, **is** as much the wrath of heaven as it is the power of hell. God disarms himself at Calvary. To put it another way: At the Cross, God made a way for his mercy and love to triumph over his justice and judgment.

In every move of history, God is very much focused on his mission to redeem a damned world. And he works within that broken and sinful world for thousands of years. He even works through broken and sinful vessels like Samson. And he works through the means of the world—including war—to remind our whole world that he is on a mission to redeem us from the horrors of sin.

While Samson's actions were spontaneous and deadly, God's hand was in them to kill but also to restrain. The Philistines were always aware that Samson was God's servant. They were aware that a spiritual battle was happening behind the scenes. So when they finally think they have Samson bound and defeated, they hold a celebration for their god Dagon and bring Samson out to make fun of him... and indirectly to make fun of the Lord God whom Samson represents. But God reminds the Philistines through Samson's actions that he is greater than the god Dagon. And by showing them his power he keeps inviting them to forsake their idols and believe in him.

Fast forward to the cross and, in the end, God pours out his wrath against our sin on himself. And saves us. And now he points us—and all people—to the cross and says, believe in me. I've conquered sin once and for all through my Son. I'm victorious. And I did that for you.

## MORNING WORSHIP

July 17, 2022 10AM

### GOD CALLS US TO WORSHIP

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Gathering Song: *Lord, Our Lord, Your Glorious Name* LUYH 500

\* Call to Worship

\* God's Greeting

\* Songs of Praise:

*Come Let Us Worship and Bow Down*

LUYH 510

*How Great is Our God/How Great Thou Art*

### WE RENEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Prayer of Confession

Assurance of Forgiveness

God's Will for Our Lives

\* Song: *Fly*

### GOD GIVES US HIS WORD

Prayer for the Word

Scripture Readings: Judges 14:19, 15:3-8, 14-15, 16:21-30

Hosea 13:16; Hebrews 12:18-29

Sermon: ***The God of Genocide***

### RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

\* Song: *Yet Not I But Through Christ in Me*

Tithes & Offerings

1. Trinity Ministries

2. The Mustard Seed

Congregational Prayer

Song: *How Great Are You Lord*

### GOD SENDS US IN HIS STRENGTH

\* Our Parting Confession: OWBTG par 55-57 responsively

\* God's Parting Blessing

\* Sending Song: *Jesus Firm Foundation*

## **Our World Belongs to God:**

Minister: 55. Our hope for a new creation is not tied  
to what humans can do,  
for we believe that one day  
every challenge to God's rule  
will be crushed.

His kingdom will fully come,  
and the Lord will rule.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

**Congregation: 56. We long for that day  
when our bodies are raised,  
the Lord wipes away our tears,  
and we dwell forever in the presence of God.  
We will take our place in the new creation,  
where there will be no more death  
or mourning or crying or pain,  
and the Lord will be our light.  
Come, Lord Jesus, come.**

Pastor: 57. On that day  
we will see our Savior face to face,  
sacrificed Lamb and triumphant King,  
just and gracious.

He will set all things right,  
judge evil, and condemn the wicked.

We face that day without fear,  
for the Judge is our Savior,  
whose shed blood declares us righteous.

**Congregation: We live confidently,  
anticipating his coming,  
offering him our daily lives—  
our acts of kindness,  
our loyalty, and our love—  
knowing that he will weave  
even our sins and sorrows  
into his sovereign purpose.  
Come, Lord Jesus, come.**