

NO MORE MR. NICE GOD?

“Thousands dead within a matter of days” – imagine this newspaper headline being the first words to grace your eyes on a Monday morning. Fortunately, the closest contact many people in the United States will ever have with mass killing is reading such a headline. And yet a sickening feeling overtakes our stomachs and a grimace emerges from our faces when we encounter the devastation and carnage wrought from such an episode – even from a safe distance. The idea of killing entire groups of people – men, women, and children in mass – is repugnant to all human beings with an ounce of sympathy in their souls. And then comes the kicker. This type of violence occurs in the Bible! And not only does such violence occur, God Himself commands it. These events seem at odds with the morality espoused in the rest of the Bible. (Ironically, Biblical morality forms the standard by which we find such acts so shocking!) How could a God who is purported to be full of love and grace order the extermination of entire groups of people? How should Christians respond to this charge against God’s character? It must be conceded that this is a difficult question to address, and should not be treated flippantly.

Our response must begin with a discussion of God’s real character. What is He like? How does He interact with humanity? Is He full of grace and mercy? Is He full of wrath and justice? The Biblical picture of God is certainly not a God of fluffy clouds and halos and flowers. In the book of Exodus, God reveals certain fundamental qualities of His nature to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7, ESV)

This passage reveals a key distinctive of God’s character – He is both gracious and just. He is slow to anger, but as the ultimate judge of mankind, will ultimately punish those who do wrong. Because God is a good God, He is committed to justice and harbors anger against the sin of His creation. He is the giver of life, and therefore has the right to take life. Thus, it is not

actually possible for God to commit murder or genocide. In the first five books of the Bible, we find God exercising this right to take life more than once. In each scenario, however, God is also longsuffering and gracious towards the objects of His wrath.

But what were God's reasons for obliterating the Canaanite people? The Bible makes it clear that God judged the Canaanites for their overt wickedness, just as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. God makes this point clear to His own people before giving them the land of Canaan.

Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you. Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deuteronomy 9:4-5, ESV)

The Canaanites were not simply poor, innocent, unsuspecting people. Their culture was one of violence and immorality – even towards their own children. One reason God required the death of all the Canaanites was to ensure that their vile practices would not be carried on.

Do not fall into the trap of following their customs and worshiping their gods. Do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations worship their gods? I want to follow their example.' You must not worship the Lord your God the way the other nations worship their gods, for they perform for their gods every detestable act that the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters as sacrifices to their gods. (Deuteronomy 12:30-31, NLT)

While God's punishment seems severe, it is apparently not without warrant. Long before the Canaanite conquest, as God was promising the land of Canaan to Abraham, He predicted that hundreds of years would pass before the Israelites could inherit this land. The apparent reason for this was that the sin of the people of the land had not yet reached such corruption that they warranted total annihilation (Genesis 15:16). God does not necessarily "play favorites" with Israel either. When the Israelites digress to the same level of immorality as the

surrounding nations, God employs the Assyrian empire to eradicate them, and ordains the Babylonian army to decimate the nation of Judah.

Some may ask: would God issue a command like this today? Should the world prepare for Christians to suddenly become a militant force? A complete reading of the Scriptures would reveal that God's instruction to the Israelites to wipe out the inhabitants of a particular geographical area was a unique command, for the accomplishment of a unique purpose – the punishment of overt wickedness and the securing of land for the nation of Israel.

The Scriptures would also inform us that this objective was temporary. Israel was used to bring a Messiah into the world, and after His coming, the nature of God's Kingdom was fully revealed. God's Kingdom is not a Kingdom primarily concerned with soil or castles but with the hearts of men. God's people are not called to be crusaders in a conquest for land, but rather heralds of good news. Good news that although we, like the Canaanites, are fully deserving of total judgment and obliteration, God has found a way to show His love and satisfy His justice by the crucifixion of His own Son, Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, a Christian response to the objection regarding the Canaanite conquest must include a discussion of God's authority and His nature – loving and just. Thankfully, this discussion directs us to the place where the love and justice of God intersect most vividly – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In that moment, God displayed His great hatred for sin and His great love for His creatures. God's simultaneous commitment to justice for sin and mercy for His creatures is clearly demonstrated in that He was willing to pour out the full measure of His wrath upon His Son – instead of upon us. Far from being a genocidal maniac, the Bible portrays God as a righteous judge (perhaps a little more righteous than we might prefer), and a merciful Father, willing to bear the punishment of sin for all who place their trust in Him.