

# Understanding Holy War

## Going Deeper in 1 Samuel 15

- I. Elders: We see justice so infrequently in the Scripture and, conversely, we see grace and mercy so frequently that we have equated mercy and justice as synonymous.
  - A. Think about it: Social justice in today's day and age often means mercy.
  - B. Then, when we see justice meted out, we are appalled.
  - C. But if justice is clear, grace and mercy are all the more compelling
  - D. Last week we introduced the concept briefly of holy war in 1 Samuel 15...
    1. Two ideas fueled bin Laden: sacred space & herem warfare
      - a) Bin Laden wanted all Westerners expelled from Saudi Arabia, not just Mecca and Medina → Arabian Peninsula = sacred space  
(1) OT equivalent of Tabernacle and Temple
      - b) *herem/jihad* → holy war || uncomfortable yet?
    2. Raises several questions
      - a) What is holy war according to the Bible?
      - b) How do we reconcile a God who commanded holy war with the same God who sent Jesus to die for his enemies and says to love everyone?
      - c) How do we read these OT passages in light of the NT?
    3. Practical implications:
      - a) Church is often at odds with society → how should we engage?
      - b) Culture War / Christian Nationalism → martial terminology
      - c) Do we point to the OT to justify aggression and anger?
      - d) Do we point to the NT and argue for complete pacifism?
      - e) Do we just ignore the OT entirely and view it almost as a "different God" or as if God matured in Christ? Let's see
- II. What is OT *herem* warfare?
  - A. Potential translations of the word: banned or devoted things
  - B. Refers to plundered items and people captured during holy war
  - C. Involves consecration (suggests worship) and giving plunder to God
  - D. Deuteronomy 7 & 20
    1. *Deuteronomy 7:1–8 [1] "When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, [2] and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must **devote them to complete destruction**. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. [3] You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, [4] **for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other***

*gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. [5] But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.*

- E. Why does God care? Because he made a promise to save the world through a descendant of Israel → Jesus → and he needs to protect & preserve the line
1. *[6] “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. [7] It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, [8] but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers*
  2. Dorky as it may be, I think of LOTR → the line of kings is broken (Boromir)... but it wasn't
- F. In Deuteronomy 20 we see *Herem* has rules before, during, and after war
1. Before war
    - a) Is this battle the Will of God? CRUCIAL! “Should we go up?”
      - (1) *“God did not tell Israel that its enemies were his enemies... Israel was to be an enemy to God’s enemies.” - Longman*
      - (2) This meant they needed to see if it was God's will that they go to war, and not just do so at will → spiritual decision
        - (a) Ex: Battle of Jericho vs. Joshua 9 w/ Gibeonites
    - b) Spiritual Preparedness
      - (1) Before the 1st conquest: circumcision and Passover
      - (2) They did this in sight of Jericho (bold move)
      - (3) Idea: going into battle spiritually unprepared was worse than the risk of getting attacked during the healing period
      - (4) David: “Mty men are kept from women...always” || Uriah
      - (5) Sacrifices performed beforehand
        - (a) 1 Samuel 13 for example
      - (6) For us: think about how often we go into life completely spiritually unprepared.
    - c) Ark's Presence → Footstool of King YHWH's throne
      - (1) The ark was the mobile symbol of God's spiritual presence
      - (2) Even in the wilderness wanderings, the journey from one location to the next was considered a “battle march”
        - (3) *Before leaving a location, they would announce, “Rise up O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.” (Numbers 10:35)*
  2. During war
    - a) The march into battle is a battle march & a religious procession

- (1) Israel's camp (Numbers 2) is in the structure of an ANE war camp with King YHWH in the center surrounded by his best warriors, the Levites
- (2) Then everyone else was on the outskirts
- (3) Singing into battle, *"Give thanks to the LORD for his love endures forever." As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes (2 Chronicles 20:18-22)*
- (4) Why were prayer, song, and celebration so important during a holy war? Because **holy warfare was worship**
- b) Warfare strategy? How to fight? Battle belongs to the LORD
  - (1) There is no clear strategy; God is the victor
  - (2) If God doesn't fight, the people lose
- 3. After war
  - a) March back → Psalm 24, post-war march "King of Glory"
  - b) Celebration → Singing on the way there and the way back
  - c) *Herem*: Climactic aspect of divine warfare → the offering of the people and their possessions to the LORD
    - (1) **Warfare is worship** in OT → God won the battle so he gets the spoils (Joshua 6:19)
      - (a) Typically plunder went to the priests for use
      - (b) Prisoners were killed b/c they were unclean
    - (2) Battles OUTSIDE PL
      - (a) Opportunity to surrender and peace
    - (3) Battles INSIDE PL → Sacred Space, YHWH's country
      - (a) Complete destruction without mercy *"lest they teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God." (Deuteronomy 20:16-18)*
        - (i) Ex: Jericho and Ai // Achan stole *herem*

G. Big thoughts:

- 1. The Bible does NOT understand the destruction of the nations within the PL in OT as a slaughter of innocent people but as justice and judgment
- 2. They are all part of an inherently wicked culture that, if allowed to live, would morally and theologically pollute the Land and God's kingdom
- 3. Overarching Principle = the other pagan nations in the PL were domestic 'enemies of the state' within God's Kingdom
- 4. Overarching Principle = God is present with the army in battle
- 5. Overarching Principle = worship is warfare & holy war is worship

III. How about in the New Testament?

A. Assumptions: Many pit the OT God as a violent God against the NT God as a God of love who sends his Son to die for evil people

- 1. Jesus does say, "put your sword away," but quoting from the gospels or from Revelation immediately shows that this is a simplistic, false view of the Bible (c.f. Revelation 20:11-15)

- B. To understand how the NT ties into holy war, we need to realize that there are 6 Phases of Holy War in the Bible from a big-picture understanding
1. After Satan's rebellion, God declares war on the Serpent and his offspring
    - a) Spiritual descendants and flesh and blood descendants
  2. God fights his flesh and blood enemies via Israel (Israel is his sword)
  3. God fights Israel via the nations (b/c in their disobedience they become his enemies)
  4. God promises in the prophets to come in the future as a warrior
    - a) Daniel 7
    - b) Isaiah 63:1–4
      - [1] Who is this who comes from Edom  
"It is I, speaking in righteousness,  
mighty to save."
      - [2] Why is your apparel red,  
and your garments like his who treads in the winepress?
      - [3] "I have trodden the winepress...  
I trod them in my anger  
and trampled them in my wrath;  
their lifeblood spattered on my garments,  
and stained all my apparel.
      - [4] For the day of vengeance was in my heart,  
and my year of redemption had come. (ESV)
  5. Jesus comes as that promised warrior and he fights the true enemy → the spiritual powers and authorities that hold humanity captive
    - a) John the Baptist sounds like an OT Prophet (Phase 3)
    - b) John assumes Jesus is going to come like a warrior.
      - (1) C.F. Matt 11:1-19 → "Are you the right one?"
    - c) But Jesus isn't a warrior the way the world expected...
      - (1) As he draws closer to the headquarters of Satan, this is now a spiritual war → Exorcisms, healings, teaching w/ POWER
      - (2) It's like the monsters getting nastier in Mordor
    - d) Cross Jesus is victorious
      - (1) Paul uses holy war language in Col 2:13-15 declaring the cross as a military victory (disarmament)
        - (a) *Colossians 2:15, [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*
      - (2) Even Jesus' ascension is described in military language (Psalm 68) and the victory as *herem* (Eph 4:8)
      - (3) Psalm 68:18
        - [18] You ascended on high,

leading a host of captives in your train  
and receiving gifts among men,  
even among the rebellious,  
that the LORD God may dwell there.

e) Jesus defeated the powers not by killing them, but by dying

6. Final Phase: The final battle

a) Jesus will come again as a warrior (Dan 7; Mk 13, Rev 1; 19)

b) Revelation 19 shows

(1) Violent return with Jesus as the warrior

(2) Description of Jesus is built with references to Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah (all passages about YHWH as a warrior)

(3) Stands in contrast with the unholy warrior, the Beast, in Revelation 13

c) In the gospels → God will purge his kingdom in the future (outside the gates vs. within the city) → This is eternal *herem*

IV. Big Picture, from the Canaanites to Satan

A. The OT God is not different from the NT God nor did he change his mind

1. Canaanite warfare was simply an earlier phase of the battle that climaxes on the cross and is completed at judgment (LOTR)

2. The Canaanites were the object of warfare under judgment b/c of their sin, and that then shifts to the spiritual powers that hold all humanity under a curse

B. If you have a difficult time with the Canaanite Judgment, you should have a more challenging time with the end of the Bible

1. In the end, all of those who do not follow King Jesus will be thrown into an eternal lake of fire → men, women, and children

2. This is not a pleasant thought, but is biblically clear:

a) The punishment for sin is death

b) All rebellion (sin) leads to death (Genesis 2:17)

3. It is only b/c of God's grace that Adam and Eve were not killed on the spot

4. It is only b/c of grace we can even breathe

5. We should not be amazed that God ordered the death of the Canaanites or the Amalekites, but rather we should stand in amazement that he lets anyone live

C. Let's make it real → You are involved in a Holy War

1. If you haven't submitted yet to Christ... He broke your chains, set up a new banner in your land... will you joyfully submit to him?

2. If you do, then we join his ranks. We have been conscripted

3. Missions is warfare; It is a spiritual war; It requires spiritual weapons

a) Ephesians 6:10-18

b) 2 Corinthians 10:4-6, [4] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. [5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the

knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, [6] being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

- D. What are our spiritual weapons in this war?
  - 1. Empowered by the Spirit, we tear down strongholds with our prayers
  - 2. Empowered by the Spirit, we proclaim the good news that there's a new king on the throne
  - 3. Empowered by the Spirit, we teach kingdom truth, replacing the lies sown by the Father of Lies, the Devil
  - 4. Empowered by the Spirit, we love in word and deed, bringing wholeness from brokenness and health from what is ill → just like our King
- E. This is what missions is all about → pressing forward into the darkest corners of the earth with the spiritual light of Christ
  - 1. Taking back territory the enemy stole from Adam and Eve
  - 2. Rescuing brothers and sisters whose chains have been broken
  - 3. Defeating evil with love, replacing lies with truth
- F. Do you know how you change the world? The gospel.
  - 1. The decisive battle has already been fought. Flesh and blood is not the enemy, but the spiritual power behind
- G. This is our holy war → We cry out in prayer to our commander and chief, block the attacks of the enemy with our shield of faith, and counterattack with TRUTH
- H. This Mother's Day, I want you to hear one clarion call: Moms, raise warriors in an increasingly effeminate, lie-filled world.
  - 1. We need children who have grit, children who know truth, children who know how to pray, who know the gospel, and will love sacrificially while the world dances to tiktok videos and embraces delusions

"We have our "marching orders" → Go and disciple all nations. Frequent setbacks and apparent failure never dishearten the real pioneer. Occasional martyrdoms are only a fresh incentive. Opposition is a stimulus to greater activity. Great victory has never been possible without great sacrifice. If the winning of Port Arthur required human bullets, we cannot expect to carry the Port Arthurs and Gibraltars of the non-Christian world without loss of life. Does it really matter how many die or how much money we spend in opening closed doors, and in occupying the different fields, if we really believe that missions are warfare and that the King's Glory is at stake? War always means blood and treasure. Our only concern should be to keep the fight aggressive and to win victory regardless of cost or sacrifice. The unoccupied fields of the world must have their Calvary before they can have their Pentecost.