

How to approach violence in Scripture



Question: A nurse I know with experience in the ER and ICU had planned to read the complete Bible when she retired, starting with the Old Testament, but she gave up because of the violence. She said she couldn't take it. Any words of encouragement for her?

– **Armel Audet**, via email

Answer: It is true that the early books of the Bible and much of the Old Testament depict acts of great violence. The crucifixion of Our Lord is also an act of great cruelty and violence in the New Testament. The first thing to remember about all such matters is how the fact that the Bible records them does not necessarily mean the Bible approves of them. That said, there are difficult and dark passages that record God commanding certain cities and places to be utterly destroyed and that no one is to be left alive, not man, woman, child or animal. There is great debate at how to interpret these passages. Some say they are simply the Israelites projecting their own genocidal wishes on God. Others see them as merely an admonition to make no compromises with the world or the nations around them. Still others, as I do, see them as straight-forward commands to completely remove a people or city, leaving nothing that might influence the people of God to idolatry or imitation of the nations they were supplanting.

Two things should be observed. First, God, who gives life, also has the right to set its limits and end life when he sees fit. If I own property and decide to remove roses and plant begonias, that is within my rights to do. Perhaps the roses have gone wild or are diseased. Whatever my reason, I am free to act. Even more so with God with individuals or nations.

In a broader sense, we need to recall that, in the ancient world, things were tough all over. Life was brutal and short. There were no agreed-upon borders, there was no body of law to adjudicate differences, there was no judicial system of trial prosecution, there was no police force. Tribes moved about and conflicted over food, land and resources. Mankind emerged from the garden in a fallen and brutal state. This is what God was dealing with.

However, God, by stages, brought us from this brutal chaos to better order and peace. He chooses a people, Israel, gives them the Law, instructs them, and prepares them for the Messiah, the Prince of Peace. He limits retaliation, establishes the structures of family, the corporal works of mercy, the importance of hospitality, the rights of foreigners and the proper punishments due to sin. He commands that we love our neighbor and so forth. Hence God draws them away from violence and chaos toward love, respect and order. It is somewhat like a parent who has a small child who is subject to tantrums, selfishness and only understands punishments. But as the child grows older, the parent can reason with him and call him to respect, justice and love. When Jesus arrives, he builds on the progress and calls us even higher: to love our enemies, not retaliate, and to be willing to suffer for the truth without hatred.

Hence, your friend might consider that the Scriptures depict a journey of God's people out of brutality and chaos toward a growing sense of justice, respect and love. The early days were brutal, and God dealt with them in ways they could understand. But he brought them higher and to a better understanding of godliness and being more fully human.

Finally, I would also say that your friend has clearly been exposed to a lot of trauma working in the ER and the ICU. This is bound to affect her as she reads such passages. Perhaps she would do better to read the New Testament which, while not free of violence, is far clearer that such things are

reprehensible and unacceptable now that the Lord has raised us to higher things. The Old Testament is best read in the light of the New Testament. Start there, master the texts, and then go back to the more ancient texts and understand that many things have been surpassed and rejected while other more positive things have perdured and blessed us with a more orderly, just and peaceful epoch. Sadly, however, as we become more secular, some of our progress is slipping away, and we are becoming a more contentious and violent culture. Let us pray for a return to Biblical sensibility.

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