

Have you ever been shopping for a confirmation gift or a graduation gift and you find a great plaque with an inspiring Bible verse or a book with an inspiring title?

Here is a book on marriage, with the title, "As For Me and My House."

Do you know where that phrase comes from? "As For Me and My House"?

It comes from the book of Joshua, right? And we find it, near the end of chapter 7 in *The Story*, where Joshua, in his old age, is giving his farewell address:

And this is what he says:

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

One of the things I appreciate about reading through the Bible the way we are, this fall and all through the year, is that instead of seeing a Bible verse on a plaque, or on the cover of a book, we see these verses in context. We see how the verse fits with the rest of the story surrounding it.

So let me ask you this, have you ever hear of proof-texting?

That's when someone takes a Bible verse, and just lifts that verse out of the Bible, to make a point, or prove a point, usually in an argument. You're having a back and forth with somebody and so you pull a Bible verse out of context and you use it for your own purposes, maybe not even appropriately.

I hope you know this, but as Lutherans, we don't believe in proof texting.

We believe that it's important to understand the context, to understand how that verse fits into the immediate story, the chapters around it, and how those chapters, and that book of the Bible fits with the whole message of Scripture.

And as Lutherans, we also believe that the most faithful interpretation of any part of the Bible, is the one that is seen through the primary lens of the story of Jesus, the story of his life and death and resurrection. The Gospel story.

And that's the thread that ties together the whole story of the Bible, the whole story of salvation.

- the story of God's love for God's people
- the story of the incredible lengths God will go, to rescue His people,

- the story of God building a nation, to be a blessing to the rest of the world

And time and time again to call God's people away from false idols to love and serve God alone.

And as we see today, in chapter 7, this call to "Choose today, whom you will serve" is found in a context that is shocking. How many of you were repulsed by the violence in this chapter? How many of you were left with questions and wondered why God would allow it or direct it?

One thing I encourage you to do, when you come across questions about the Bible... questions that are hard to answer, and have even led some people to give up their faith. I encourage you not to just gloss over those passages, or ignore them. God wants us to ask questions. God wants us to dig in, and seek understanding. God is not fragile. And our faith is not fragile.

Trust me, when you dig in, you will find, faithful, intelligent, reasoned answers to your questions. Whatever you do, don't let anyone tell you, you have to leave your brain at the door to be a Christian.

So today, let's dig in together. Okay?

When Bill Maher, says that the God of the Bible is a mass murderer and Richard Dawkins, one of the New atheists implies that obedience to God means killing your neighbors instead of loving them, how do we respond?

First of all, we need to start with the big picture. God created the world to be a place of human flourishing. War and violence were not God's idea. God didn't invent it. Rather God's ideal in creation can best be expressed in the Hebrew word, *SHALOM*. Maybe you've heard that word before, but how would you define it?

This week I found a beautiful description of *SHALOM*

Listen to this:

"The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call Shalom. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight - ... Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be."

That's God's ideal. God's desire for every person on this earth is Shalom.

Now think about this:

Right here in our own community, who is charged with the daily responsibility of keeping the peace? Our local police officers, right?

Whose job is it to make sure that chaos doesn't reign, that people don't smash store windows, and steal anything they can get their hands on?

Without our local police and sheriff's deputies, without a system of laws and judges that uphold those laws, we simply would not have the flourishing of civic life.

Now think about this:

What would you do if you lived in a time and a place, where there was no such thing... as peace and safety from neighboring tribes?

All historians agree that the ancient Near Eastern world was exceedingly violent. (It still is) It was a kill-or-be-killed world, and because of the Fall, violence entered the world. War was not God's idea.

And yet, God is not silent in the face of evil. That is a key point if we are to understand the violence we read about in the Old Testament. God is not silent in the face of evil.

God is a God of peace AND a God of justice. Without justice, there is no authentic peace. So in order to understand these stories of warfare we need to understand God's justice and wrath in response to those who robbed people of SHALOM.

Listen to this quote about God's response:

*"God is, after all, not arbitrarily offended. God hates sin not just because it violates his law, but more importantly because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. We may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically, morally, or spiritually."*ⁱⁱ

And here is one thing many people don't know.

What made Israel stand out, from all the other warring nations is that it actually had general guidelines for warfare:

- they were to offer terms of peace to distant cities before attack
- they were not to attack without warning, so that innocent non-combatants could escape unharmed.
- Women and children were to be spared.

So what about the stories we just read in Joshua, that seem to fall outside these guidelines?

First of all, there are indications that women and children would have fled, Jericho. Jeremiah 4:29 hints at the fact, that "at the sound of an approaching army innocents flee a city."

Secondly, the story of the conquest of the Canaanites speaks of total destruction and showing no mercy... but then proceeds to instruct the Israelites regarding treaties and intermarriage.

So if no Canaanites were going to survive, why even mention treaties and intermarriage?

Or think of Rahaab.

If strict obedience meant showing no mercy to anyone, then why is this Canaanite woman and her family spared?

Is it not possible, that this passage right at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan is there to show us that God, above all, is a God of mercy?

In the Rahaab story, it is faith that saved her. She turned away from the idols and false gods of the Canaanites, and for that, not only was she protected, but she was woven into God's story of salvation in the genealogy of Jesus and she was one of only a few heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11.

And then finally, did you know that God had given the Canaanites over 400 years to repent? ...talk about being slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But not only did the Canaanites, not repent, do you know what kind of people they were? On the surface, we might read this story and just assume these people were morally neutral... that they were occupying land that God wanted to give to Israel, and so it was time for them to go.

But they weren't morally neutral.

Do you know what kind of evil they did, to their own women and children? It's not just that they worshipped false idols. That was bad enough, but it was also the way they worshipped these idols.

As they worshipped their deity Molech, the men decided to include visiting temple prostitutes as part of their religion. Do you think God looks kindly on the degrading of women, in the name of worship?

Add to that, all kinds of depravity which included: the widespread practice of rape, and incest, and bestiality. They also believed that their gods wanted each family to sacrifice their first born child. This is just impossible for us to imagine, but get this: Families for "good luck" to worship their idols, would kill their first born and put their child in the foundation of the house. Archeologists are finding these jars, in the walls of houses, in that region in that same part of the world.

Can you even imagine the kind of twisted belief system that could justify such evil?

Well, we've seen it in our own lifetime.
Just think about what the Nazi's did to human beings.

To those who want to blame and accuse God of evil,
let me ask you this: "What kind of God turns a blind eye to a nation that practices such evil?"

Is there a time for war, for the sake of greater peace?

From a reading of the history of that time,
I believe that rebellion, and depravity, and the violation of Shalom, had become so rampant,
that among all the nations of the earth,

God decided to work his plan of salvation, beginning with one nation, the children of Abraham.
In God's providence, God used this occasion of judgment to restore the land promised to
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But it was never because Israel was "better" or morally superior.
In fact, Deuteronomy 9:5 makes it clear:

*"It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity,
that you are going in to take possession of the land, but on account of the wickedness of
these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you."*

to fulfill his covenant promise to Abraham.

What is often overlooked is that God later used the nations of Assyria, and Babylon to judge
Israel for their wickedness and idolatry."

So what is the take away here?

Let's go back to Joshua's farewell address at the end of Chap. 7.

After all these battles. After all their victories, God says to the people through Joshua:

"You did not do this with your own sword and bow."

"I gave you this land, for a purpose." "You are to be a Light to all nations."

"You are to live holy lives, that are set apart from other nations."

Earlier, God said through Moses,

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

*Now choose life, so that your children may live and that you may love the Lord your
God."*

And through Joshua, God says:

“Choose today, whom you will serve... whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

And today, God says the same thing to you and me.

We may not have idols made of stone and wood, but what do you think God has to say about the way women are sexualized and degraded in our culture? Did you know that in this country alone, every single year, over \$13 billion dollars is spent on pornography?

And pornography is never neutral. There is always someone who suffers. There is always someone who is being exploited, even if they are exploiting themselves.

And God says enough!

You were made in my image, don't degrade yourself or anyone else.
Don't do it! It's idolatry.
It's worshipping another god.

I could give many other examples in our own community, how we turn away from God, how we do things that are shameful and idolatrous.

That's why God says to us,

“Choose today, whom you will serve. Turn from other gods.
Keep my commandments.
Let your light shine.
Let my love live in your hearts.
Draw close to me, and I will draw close to you.” Amen.

ⁱ Cornelius Plantinga

ⁱⁱ Ibid.