

# God and War

## What's the balance for Christians and war?

I have huge respect for those who want to join the police force or the military, because in this world they are putting their lives on the line, and they are risking great hurt for their families too. Every time I hear a police car thundering down our road with his siren blaring, I just pray, because at that speed a blown tire, or an animal crossing the road, or someone backing onto the road not seeing him, could spell death or horrible injury, which the officer's family then has to live with for years afterwards.

I have vivid memories too, of what it was like for our daughter when her husband was in Afghanistan, and due to some emergency out there she would not hear from him for days. We'd spend hours on the phone with her and we'd talk every morning with our granddaughter before she went to school to send her off happy and calm. But we remembered what happened after our son-in-law's first tour in Afghanistan when our daughter found him in the basement with a noose round his neck, about to hang himself. She had now experienced life and death in the raw, and we now lived with it too, and it was scary.

But then off he went on a second tour, this time as a sergeant in charge of a group of men, whose job it was to head out each day to patrol and protect the area round the camp. Half way through that tour he came home on leave and he showed us some videos from his helmet cam, including a close up of one of his men blown up by a roadside bomb, and a man he killed running through an orchard. He admitted quietly to me after showing those videos that he now felt what he was doing was wrong. But despite being transferred to a non-combatant role with the stress of his conscience removed it wasn't enough to recover his mental state or save his marriage.

And we could probably repeat that story for millions of other soldiers and their families in every war fought. But that's the world we've had to live in since the moment Adam and Eve rejected God's rule in their lives, witnessed the tragic murder of one of their sons by the other, and then watched in horror for the rest of their long lives as violence and evil swept through the land, consuming everyone and everything in its path except one man, Noah. It's interesting, then, what God said to Noah **after** the flood in **Genesis 9:5-6**.

“And for your lifeblood (and all human lifeblood),” God says, “I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal that kills a human, and from every human who kills another human too. Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.”

This is a landmark ruling in the Bible, because it’s the beginning of **human government**. Before the flood there wasn’t government of any kind - no armies, no police force, no justice system. God didn’t even require the death penalty for Cain murdering his brother, so capital punishment didn’t exist either. But the result was **total anarchy**, because “every inclination of the thoughts of people’s hearts was only evil all the time.” And SO evil did that world become that God even regretted creating humans in the first place (Genesis 6:5, 7).

But in his love for humans he set up a new system that would prevent evil doing that to humans ever again. It was based on **valuing life** - of both animals and people - but specifically people because as Genesis 9 says, God made humans in his image. For **human life**, therefore, God says in **Genesis 9:5**, “I will surely demand an accounting.” If a human is killed by an animal, or by another human being, the life of that dead person must be accounted for by the death of the animal or person that killed him.

And who carries out that death? The answer in **verse 6** is: “Whoever sheds human blood, **by humans** shall their blood be shed.” So now we have **capital punishment** for the first time too, involving people being assigned to execute humans who intentionally and unjustly kill other people: And that requires a formal government being set up to make sure that God’s ruling is obeyed. It also involves people being assigned to investigate what happened, decide who’s guilty, and have the guilty party punished with death. So now we have a **justice system** being set up as well, all of which put together is now God’s way of controlling and reversing the horror before the flood of evil people slaughtering each other without any respect or reverence for life. It’s the first Constitution or Charter of Rights, based from this point forward on the solid, unmovable footing of the value of human life and stopping evil spreading like it did before the flood.

It is now the God-given duty of this new human-ruled government to execute those who do **not** value the lives of their fellow humans, and do not take the eradication of evil seriously. How that was administered isn’t mentioned, but in **Genesis 11:1** “the whole world had one language and a common speech,” which is a very different picture to what was happening before the flood.

What we see in these early chapters of Genesis, then, is **civil government** being set up by God involving law enforcement, a justice system and capital punishment. It's not ideal, because it still involved the deliberate and forceful killing of humans by humans to eradicate evil, but this is what God set up at this time in human history to nip evil in the bud.

I imagine this all sounds very familiar, of course, because we have much the same set up today to deal with evil, and based on exactly the same principle too, of good people banding together and by force removing evil people. And isn't that the way you stop evil spreading today as well? You nip it in the bud by forcefully removing the people who do not value the lives of other people. And again, what you need for that is total commitment by human-ruled government to uphold God's mandate of eradicating evil. Any threat to that God-given mandate must be put down quickly and conclusively by execution of the guilty party.

It was just and right in God's sight, therefore, to remove evil people by killing them. So Scripture includes a just cause for killing. It's "just" because in reality it's based on self-defense, to protect society from the cancer of evil spreading and evil people getting the upper hand. It also explains why God allowed anarchy to rule for hundreds of years before the flood, because it clearly shows **what evil can do** when it's left unchecked, and evil people are allowed a free hand.

Meanwhile, if someone **accidentally** killed another person, with no evil intent, then later on in Moses' day God provided Cities of Refuge to protect the innocent from those who sought revenge and nothing else. But the decision of innocence or guilt was still presided over by a jury of elders. And that meant courts requiring at least two viable witnesses, and judges coming up with a final verdict. And if a witness lied he was killed too.

So God set up a system governed and ruled by humans to protect the innocent, deal with the guilty and stop the spread of evil. And that system has remained in place ever since, as we see in **Romans 13:1-4**, because here's Paul saying: "Let everyone be subject to the (human-ruled) governing authorities, because the authorities (and human-ruled government) that exist have been established by God. So, whoever rebels against that authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves....For the one in authority is God's servant for your good....(and) they (the civil authorities) do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants and his agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Paul is describing the same civil government system that God set up in Genesis 9, that still has the power of “the sword” to protect people by forcefully eradicating evil and evil people. And this system must still be respected by Christians too, as we see again in **1 Peter 2:13-14** when Peter also writes: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers."

This handily answers the question for Christians as to whether civil government is still God’s way of dealing with evil in this world. Yes, it is. It also answers the question as to whether it’s right and just in God’s sight to kill evil people who do not value human life. Yes, it is. It also answers the question as to why God allowed so much killing in the Old Testament - at his own hand, as well as ordering Israel to wipe out entire cities and tribes, including their women, children and their livelihood (by having their animals killed as well). To those who question how a loving God could do such a thing, his answer is simple: Just remember what it was like before the flood, the clear message being, “If you don’t nip evil in the bud, it will spread and destroy you.”

In a world without the Holy Spirit operating in all human hearts yet, this has been God’s way of protecting the human race from the crippling, cruel and utterly destructive force of evil. And when a human-ruled government understands this is God’s purpose, and that God is the one who put them in power as “his servant to do good” (Romans 13:4), they can rightfully call on him to bless their efforts in putting down evil by force. And that applies equally to squashing evil within one’s own country, and in war against an evil power.

We see that in so many examples from Israel’s history in the Old Testament. The Amalekites, for instance, were the psychopaths of their day. They did not respect God or value human life in the least, witness their brutal attack on the stragglers at the back of the “weary and worn out” trail of Israelites on their way out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). So God tells Israel that when they’re settled in the land “you shall blot out the name of Amalek, and don’t you forget.” But Israel never did kill them off, and Amalek remained a thorn in their side. It reinforced God’s message that you don’t compromise with evil; you eradicate it.

Which is exactly what Samuel did. When King Saul did not kill the Amalekite King Agag as God had commanded, Samuel, who wasn’t even a soldier, grabbed a sword and did Agag in himself (1 Samuel 15:32-33).

But we have one **different** example in Israel's history in how evil was dealt with, which hints at what human-ruled government can also do when threatened by evil forces. Picture Jehoshaphat, king of Judah and God's ruling servant for good at the time, when he's given the news in **2 Chronicles 20:2** that a vast enemy army is on a blitzkrieg mission to wipe out his country, and it's only 15 miles away. The first thing the king does is panic, of course, but the next thing he does is call for a National Day of Fasting and Prayer (3-4).

Jehoshaphat himself then stood up before "All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones" at the temple (13) and prayed, "If calamity comes upon us, O Lord God of our fathers, we will stand in your presence and cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us....For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (9, 12).

The answer from God through Jahaziel, a Levite priest, was swift: "Do not be afraid or discouraged by this vast army, for the battle is not yours, it is God's. So go out tomorrow and face them, and the Lord will be with you" (14-15, 17).

Jehoshaphat then did something that no other king in Israel's history had done before. At the very front of his army as it headed out to meet the enemy he had a choir of men singing, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever" (21). And they sang until they reached a high point overlooking the desert where the enemy's forces had gathered and, shock upon shock, the entire enemy army was just a heap of dead bodies. Not one of them was left alive. It took three days to collect the enemy's clothing and equipment, after which Jehoshaphat and his army "returned joyfully" to the temple in Jerusalem to loudly thank God with all sorts of musical instruments (24-27).

Jehoshaphat had every right, of course, and with God's backing, to fight to protect his people from that vast army with its evil intentions, but in his prayer at the temple Jehoshaphat twice mentioned the words, "your Name," because it was **God's name and HIS power and might** that their nation represented, and it was GOD'S judgment he wanted on the enemy, not his own (6-9, 12). And look what God did in response to Jehoshaphat's prayer: the entire enemy army was destroyed without any loss of life on the Israelite side. The surrounding nations were also so impressed with "how the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel," that "the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was **at peace**, for his God had given him rest on every side" (29-30). This was peace accomplished without war.

So why didn't all the kings of Israel and Judah follow Jehoshaphat's example? More to the point, why don't the governing authorities today follow his example? According to Paul in Romans 13 and Peter in 1 Peter 2, today's civil government leaders are just as much "servants of God" under the same system God set up in Genesis 9, so their mandate is exactly the same, to value human life and protect their people from evil. And here they've got the true story of a king - faced with an evil enemy determined to wipe his people out - who admits to being utterly helpless and he trusts God to sort the situation out, the result being that **no human life under his care and authority was lost**. Not one.

So why didn't our governing leaders facing the might and evil of Hitler do that? But they decided to fight evil, which was their right, yes, according to Romans 13:4 (the governing authorities "do not bear the sword for nothing"), but many thousands of dead soldiers later the Allied Army had been totally surrounded by the Axis powers and was on the verge of being completely eliminated. It was at this point, though, that a humble, stammering, unimpressive man, King George VI, called for a **National Day of Prayer**. He was willing to admit their helplessness and he turned the nation's attention to God to sort things out. In other words, a Christian king **did exactly what king Jehoshaphat did**.

Such an idea could never have come from Winston Churchill. He loved war, and admitted it, but who could refuse the king? So up and down the country and all over the Empire people poured into churches and gathered in parks and stadiums to pray. And suddenly, only 10 miles from Dunkirk, Hitler ordered his armoured columns to stop, a massive storm then grounded the German Luftwaffe, and a great calm settled over the English Channel for several days, allowing a vast armada of boats and ships to rescue and save the lives of a third of a million men.

It was the same king who then called **another** National Day of Prayer on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1942, when the Allied Forces were in full retreat in Northern Africa and were holed up at El Alamein. One more decisive victory by Rommel here and the battle was over. But then, very suddenly, the German advance stopped again, this time because Rommel's tanks had not been sent the fuel they needed, and Rommel himself became ill for the first time in his life and he had to return to Germany. The commander who took his place then died from a heart attack, Rommel's Chief of Staff was on leave, and so was the man responsible for getting Rommel's supplies through to him. Throughout the battle of the next few days, therefore, Rommel's tanks were often just standing there out of fuel, and by the end of October the battle that could easily have been won by Rommel was over.

Five more National Days of Prayer were called during World War 2, resulting in a terrific storm that blew away the barges meant for Hitler's land invasion of Britain, an earthquake that threw Hitler's second invasion boats 80 miles off course, and when defeat seemed inevitable during the Battle of Britain, Hitler suddenly ordered his Luftwaffe to attack London instead. And in Britain when there was a desperate shortage of food - to quote a newspaper from that time - "divine power gave us a record harvest just when we most needed it."

You wonder, of course, why a National Day of Prayer wasn't called the moment it was obvious what Hitler was up to, especially after King George V had called for a National Day of Prayer on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1918, and only 100 days later World War 1 was over. Both government and churches had clear evidence from Scripture - and now from experience too - that when we humans turn to God for his mercy and help, even after we've made a horrible mess of things because we ignored or misunderstood his clear teachings, he responds, just as he always did to the cries of the Israelites.

So war isn't the only option our government leaders have when dealing with evil, and it was two Christian kings who reminded them of that, and with amazing results that **proved** it was an option too. They were illustrating a different way of dealing with evil, that didn't exist back in Genesis 9. There were hints of this different way, though, in the example of Jehoshaphat turning the entire nation to God and trusting him to sort things out, and look what happened. And now two Christian kings had followed Jehoshaphat's example, and look what happened again. With these marvelous examples tucked away in our history, therefore, who in his right mind can ignore that something different is possible in the eradication of evil, other than just killing people?

And isn't this what we Christians should be focusing on? It's not on whether Christians should go to war or not, it's on what God has **ALSO** made possible in dealing with evil - and even **more so** since Christ's death.

OUR identity as Christians is in Christ, not in civil government, because as Jesus said in John 18:36, his kingdom is not of this world. But here we have a chance to see how our identity in Christ and **his** kingdom plays out practically in the world we live in today. We know, first of all, for instance, that "The reason the Son of God appeared was **to destroy the devil's work.**" So the eradication of evil has **ALREADY HAPPENED**. It was the sacrifice of JESUS' human life that did it. All the human sacrifice needed to eradicate evil, therefore, has been done.

But evil still exists, right? It's no wonder, then, that Paul and Peter talked about the continuing need for human-ruled government to keep evil in check, until the time every human has the evil in his heart removed by the Holy Spirit. That hasn't happened yet, so in the meanwhile we still need armies, a police force, a justice system, law enforcement, jail time, and capital punishment to keep evil in check. And as Christians we support that, knowing it is still God's way of dealing with evil UNTIL Jesus comes again to set up his kingdom in full.

But God also has us Christians in this world to illustrate a different way. And it's not by being dead sacrifices it's by "offering our bodies as **living sacrifices**, holy and pleasing to God - which is your spiritual worship," **Romans 12:1**. And spiritual worship, **verse 2**, means "no longer conforming to the pattern of this world; it means having our minds transformed." In other words, we don't combat evil the way the world does, by force and violence. We get right down to the only real and permanent way of eradicating evil, which, **verse 2**, is the human mind "testing and approving what GOD'S good, pleasing and perfect will is." That's where the battle against evil for us lies; it's having our minds transformed into God's way of thinking, and focusing on that in every situation we face.

So what does this say to Christians who went to war, believing that eradicating evil by killing people was God's good, pleasing and perfect will for Christians too? Paul's answer for that is **Romans 8:33** - "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." We can't judge what other Christians do, because God's grace is sufficient to cover whatever decisions we Christians make. But Peter did say in **2 Peter 3:18**, "grow in the grace and **knowledge** of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." We understand his grace - that he's merciful and he forgives us if we're muddled in our thinking - but he also expects us to grow in our KNOWLEDGE of God's good, pleasing and perfect will too.

So our thinking may change over the years, including our thinking about war and the balance on war for us Christians. But here's another reason why "Our Identity in Christ" is so important, because the living Jesus Christ is now the one "working in us to will and to act in accordance with God's good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Who knows, then, how many Christians who went to war had second thoughts? But even if they didn't, Jesus is their teacher and judge, and he lovingly met them **where they were at** in their understanding of God's will at the time.

We don't judge, therefore, but in our pursuit of right knowledge we can ask penetrating questions, and the kind of questions that need to be asked as we Christians "press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of us," **Philippians 3:12**, so that all our minds are more and more in tune with his.