

Numbers 31: Justice and Mercy

By

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“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the children of Israel. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.” So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm some of yourselves for war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the LORD on Midian. “A thousand from each tribe of all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the war.” So there were recruited from the divisions of Israel one thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war. Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from each tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand. And they warred against the Midianites, just as the LORD commanded Moses, and they killed all the males. They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of those who were killed—Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. Balaam the son of Beor they also killed with the sword. And the children of Israel took the women of Midian captive, with their little ones, and took as spoil all their cattle, all their flocks, and all their goods. They also burned with fire all the cities where they dwelt, and all their forts. And they took all the spoil and all the booty—of man and beast.”

-Numbers 31:1-11

Today we are going to be discussing one of the more difficult passages in the Bible. During our time studying the books of Genesis, Exodus, and now Numbers, we have run across a number of passages that challenge our modern sensibilities and make us really struggle with the text that we are reading. While most of the passages we have gone over so far deal with the Law that God gave to His people, or to individual actions, or acts of divine judgement, in this passage we are faced with a very ugly depiction of warfare between the Israelites and the Midianites.

While we have seen battles in this book in the past, the battles that we discussed before were purely defensive. Enemies attacked Israel and they responded to the attacks, winning miraculous victories. But in this passage, we see God command His people to attack the Midianites and to conquer them in a fairly brutal fashion. Even though Midian had tried to curse Israel, first through the prophet Balaam and then by sending women into their camp to seduce the men and lead them into idolatry, their “attacks” against Israel were not direct military action. As such, I think that when we read about an offensive assault led by the Israelites against another nation, it causes us to struggle

with the Bible. Beyond this, passages like this are a precursor to even more troubling passages in the book of Joshua when the Israelites actually conquer the land of promise, but we will discuss those battles in more specificity when we get to the book of Joshua.

For the purposes of our discussion today, I wanted to talk about the difficulties that many people have with this passage and offer up some potential explanations for what we see here. But after that I do want to discuss the deeper implications of this passage and to show why understanding this dimension of God's character is so vital.

Wrestling With God

"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD..."
-Isaiah 1:18

The most freeing and frustrating thing about our God is how He simultaneously defies our expectations and categories, and yet desires to be understood by His people. This interesting combination allows the sincere follower of God to pursue Him without ever fully grasping Him. The result of this is that we have to wrestle with God. This shouldn't surprise us because the primary name that God assigned to His people was "Israel", a conjunction of two Hebrew words that can mean "one who wrestles with God". This name was given to one of the patriarchs of the Jews, Jacob, who is renamed "Israel" after he literally wrestles with God in the wilderness.

As I said before, this part of God's nature is, firstly, liberating and comforting, because we know that we serve a God who *allows* His people to wrestle with Him. Most pagan deities that we have created over time act more like petty tyrants and don't suffer the questions and complaints of their servants. But our God does both. He allows His people to question Him openly, and even to criticize Him at times. However, this reality is also deeply frustrating because this means that the people of God, no matter how sincere, will *have* to wrestle with God.

*"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, Measured heaven with a span
And calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales
And the hills in a balance? Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His
counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him,
And taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, And showed Him the
way of understanding?"*
-Isaiah 40:12-14

We are told time and time again in Scripture that God's ways are not our ways, that His nature is "Holy", meaning set apart, and entirely different than anything we can fully comprehend or know, that His ways are in fact beyond our finding out and that the one who approaches God must do so with an infinite amount of humility. Achieving this balance is almost impossible for the followers of God.

Many Christians struggle with God's approachability. They feel overwhelmed by the glory and power of God and would prefer to leave the nature of God a complete mystery. This willful ignorance sounds humble and can give someone a sense of peace, but this is not the kind of relationship that God wants for His people. He didn't call us to be "agnostics" towards His nature, He desires for us to come and know Him better. This is one of the primary reasons why God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. He desires to be known by His people.

Others struggle with His unknowability. We want God's nature to be simple and understood. We don't like sitting in mystery as to His nature and therefore we tend to offer overly simplistic explanations towards God's nature and His behavior. This turns us arrogant and dismissive of other views, it turns curiosity to dogma makes us closed-minded fundamentalists.

I think that the philosopher Blaise Pascal explains this tension best:

"Nature confutes the sceptics, and reason confutes the dogmatists. What, then, will you become, O men! who try to find out by your natural reason what is your true condition?... Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Humble yourself, weak reason; be silent, foolish nature; learn that man infinitely transcends man, and learn from your Master your true condition, of which you are ignorant. Hear God... We perceive an image of truth and possess only a lie. Incapable of absolute ignorance and of certain knowledge, we have thus been manifestly in a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen."

-Blaise Pascal - "Pensées"

We are, in some sense cursed, to walk this line in which we are neither fully ignorant nor fully knowledgeable about God and His nature. This means we are expected to draw near to God and know Him more, but we are also expected to maintain our humility before Him and accept our own ignorance.

"Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil."

-Proverbs 3:7

Wrestling With Difficult Passages

“And they warred against the Midianites, just as the LORD commanded Moses, and they killed all the males. They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of those who were killed—Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. Balaam the son of Beor they also killed with the sword. And the children of Israel took the women of Midian captive, with their little ones, and took as spoil all their cattle, all their flocks, and all their goods. They also burned with fire all the cities where they dwelt, and all their forts. And they took all the spoil and all the booty—of man and beast.”

-Numbers 31:7-11

This wrestling that we do with the nature of God will inevitably extend to some of the actions and commandments made by God throughout the Scriptures. As modern people, when we read accounts, like the one above, it causes us a good bit of understandable consternation. We might be able to understand the acts of warfare that happened at the beginning of the chapter, but it is very hard to justify what takes place at the end of the chapter. For Moses to order the execution of women, after the fighting is over, goes beyond the pale for most of us.

Before we discuss proper ways to look at this passage, I wanted to reemphasize the point I made earlier. Passages like this are not meant to be taken simply, we are meant to wrestle with them. I know most of us would prefer to focus on the non-controversial elements of our faith, like God being love or the mercy of Christ, but there is a reason why God places passages like this in our Bibles. They contain elements of His nature that we have to take seriously, and if we are willing to wrestle with them, they have the power to edify us in our understanding of God and how He works within history.

Some of the simple answers that Christians offer to these passages would either be a type of dismissal, or an emphatic explanation. A dismissal would look something like the Marcion heresy of the second century. Marcion was a heretical teacher who taught that the God of the Old Testament was a fundamentally different being than the God of the New Testament. Therefore, in accordance with His view, we can more or less ignore these passages, and condemn them as evil and focus only on the passages in the New Testament.

This view was rightly condemned by early Christians because it teaches something that innately contradicts Scripture. Jesus did not present Himself as a separate deity but as the Son of God. Not some foreign God, but the God of the Old Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Beyond this, Christ and His followers quoted reverently from the Old Testament and treated these writings as equally authoritative to what Christ revealed about Himself.

But unfortunately this false belief is still alive and well in the church today, sometimes being just as blatant as Marcion, but others are more subtle in their arguments. But fundamentally they are arguing for much the same thing, that we can essentially ignore the Old Testament passages that we feel contradict the message of the gospel and focus only on the passages we agree with. There are many ways that Christians today try to do this, I think the most tenable version of this is from men like Greg Boyd who essentially argue that Moses was reading his own prejudices into the commands of God and was acting against the will of God in these passages, albeit ignorantly.

Obviously I am being very simplistic in my description but the point remains pretty clear. As Christians we are not given the liberty to merely dismiss passages like this. But the other way of dealing with it is equally dangerous, though it isn't very common. Instead of dismissing passages like this, we can instead accept them without scrutiny. In other words we can say, yes these passages are every bit as ugly as they sound, but God is entitled to do whatever He pleases so let's move on and not dwell on this. This is an equally simplistic answer that doesn't really wrestle with how these passages can harmonize with the more merciful passages of the Scripture.

People who do this are taking Scripture literally, but they aren't taking these passages as seriously as they should. Meaning that they aren't letting the deeper implications of these passages sink in because they are basically skipping over them. The current author who I think exemplifies this proper stance of wrestling with God's quite well is Paul Copan. While I don't know enough about Paul to recommend all his views, on this particular subject he does demonstrate a fair amount of objectivity and humility in his scholarship. His two more popular books on this subject are "Is God a Moral Monster?" and "Is God a Vindictive Bully".

Both books wrestle with passages like the one above and try to give a more nuanced view of what is really going on in these passages. To give a quick summation of his findings, he does two primary things when evaluating passages like this. He considers the historical context and he considers the intended audience. When it comes to the historical context. We have talked before about how God is communicating with people living in ancient Mesopotamia over three thousand years ago. These are people who thought very differently than we do today and had vastly different moral judgements.

Remember that when Moses is leading the people of Israel to the promised land, their moral structure is mostly taken from the Egyptians that they had been dwelling with for hundreds of years. They have only had their new moral structure for forty years while they have dwelt in the wilderness. And truth be told, ancient people in the near east

simply didn't think the way that we do today. They had very different values and beliefs, this is why it is folly to judge the behaviors of past peoples in accordance with current moral sentiments. Take this passage from Genesis:

"This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God."

-Genesis 6:9

Notice that the author of Genesis doesn't just say that Noah was "perfect" or some translations put that "blameless", they specify that he was "perfect in his generations". This is an important note. The author is not asking us to assume that Noah would have been blameless in accordance with our current moral sentiments, but instead that in accordance with his own moral system, he was blameless. This is the most we can ask of people from the past. If someone lives higher than their moral structure, we can praise them, and if they live lower we can condemn them, but if they live merely in accordance with their moral structure, any praise or condemnation that we offer is actually praise or condemnation of the structure and not the individual.

For instance, up until the nineteenth century in western Europe, slavery was a universal practice in every human society spanning back as far as human civilization. This means that every culture widely approves of this practice, albeit with certain boundaries around the practice. It is even hard to find many Christians that condemned the institution of slavery prior to this time, though we can find some. Therefore, if I read about George Washington or Thomas Jefferson owning slaves, it is an act of folly to condemn them with the same vigor that I would use for a modern slave holder. The reason? They were blameless in their generation. Any critique that I have for these men is actually a critique of the culture at large and not against their individual folly.

Unfortunately warfare in the ancient near east was brutal. In our modern day, we have a long history of various philosophers and theologians who have worked out what we now call "just war theory" which have in turn manifested in things like the Geneva Convention in which we have put forward universal ethical standards for the conduct of war which presupposes universal human rights. This was not the perspective of the ancient world.

In the ancient world there was no presumed dignity offered to those defeated in combat. There wasn't even a presumed dignity towards enemy nations. This is why raiding and pillaging civilian populations was common practice for the majority of human history. It is also why the law of conquest was the universal standard for the rights of land ownership throughout the world. If a nation lost a war, they had no intrinsic right to a particular land

mass. It wasn't even considered cruel or inordinate to slaughter the men, rape the women, take captive the children, and loot the city.

Once again, this perspective is foreign to us, but it was the norm for almost every human civilization until very recently. There have always been societies who have bound themselves to more or less humane standards of warfare, but the basic rights of the victors of conquest were universally respected. This is why, even when conquest comes to the Israelites, God really only condemns extreme excesses of the conquerors.

So, while the conduct of the Israelites in passages like this are shocking to us, in the ancient near east, it would have been not only acceptable, but surprisingly humane. After all, Israel is the only nation to forbid its soldiers from raping female captives:

"When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God delivers them into your hand, and you take them captive, "and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and desire her and would take her for your wife, "then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and trim her nails. "She shall put off the clothes of her captivity, remain in your house, and mourn her father and her mother a full month; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. "And it shall be, if you have no delight in her, then you shall set her free, but you certainly shall not sell her for money; you shall not treat her brutally, because you have humbled her."

-Deuteronomy 21:10-14

Passages like this sound harsh to us, but they would have been incredibly restrained for that period of human history. This is the *first* nation to outlaw the rape of female captives, up until this point, and even to this day, it is a matter of course that armies rape the women of those they have conquered and even keep them for sex slaves. We have to remember that when God gives specific political commandments to His people, these commands are expressions of the divine law that could actually be understood and maintained by the people that God was talking to. This is why commands like this are not binding on the conscience of the modern Christian.

But herein lies the ultimate irony of the modern skeptic. The modern skeptic condemns stories like this in the Bible, not realizing that they are condemning these stories by using the very moral structure that the Bible uniquely gave to them. In other words, there is a reason why warfare like this was *never* condemned by any of our ancestors, and remains permissible in many cultures still living today. It is because all these worldviews lacked a very unique Judeo Christian ethic that *all* people are made in the image of God and are therefore worthy of basic human rights, even if they are our

enemies. No other religion or worldview taught this because no other worldview or religion believed that.

But if the ethics of the Bible truly are at odds with the excesses of warfare, why are these things commanded by God in the Old Testament? The moral elements of the Law, the parts that talk about universal human dignity, mercy, and justice, these more generic moral commands are universal and binding, but the practical, political commands were God's way of articulating these higher laws to the people at a level they could receive, to quote from Christ:

"He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'"

-Matthew 19:8

The divine Law is that marriage is for life and that divorce is evil. But because man is fallen and corrupt, God gave us a human law that allowed for divorce. This doesn't mean that God "approves" of divorce, only that God *allows* for divorce to accommodate man's fallen nature. In the same way, it isn't that God approves of warfare or the specific ways it was conducted, only that God *allows* His people to go to war with groups of people groups like the Midianites in a way that would be familiar to them, while also regulating some of the excesses.

Another point that Paul Copan makes is regarding the intended audience. In the modern west, we do value specificity in our reporting, however in the ancient near east this wasn't true. Not only was exaggeration not discouraged, even in serious historical works, it was *expected* that there would be grandiose accounts of what really happened. As such, it was common practice for authors in that part of the world to use overly exaggerated language to describe military victories. So when we read passages like:

"And they warred against the Midianites, just as the LORD commanded Moses, and they killed all the males."

-Numbers 31:7

Coupled with passages where Moses later commands that all the young males be slaughtered, the ancient audience would hear this as an exaggerated description of wiping out that generation, or to put it another way, of fully defeating the men of that nation, not necessarily as a literal depiction of killing all the males. But do we have evidence that this is the intended way we should read these passages?

The simple answer is yes. If we took these passages literally, we actually have major contradictions in the text of Scripture. So if we really believe that the Israelites literally killed all the males, and all the females that had sexual relations with men, and then captured all the young girls, this would mean that the Midianites were completely wiped out. There would be no people group to survive a slaughter that complete and their identity would have been completely assimilated into Israel after one generation. But this isn't what we see.

Within a couple generations we see that not only is Midian still a nation, but they are powerful enough to oppress the people of Israel:

"Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains."

-Judges 6:1-2

If all the males were truly wiped out, this passage from Judges couldn't possibly be true. Paul Copan does a really good job of showing dozens of passages like this that demonstrates that these passages are exaggerated and not fully literal as we would understand them today.

But, even with all that context, there are still things in this account that are difficult for us to understand, and difficult for us to reconcile with God's more loving and merciful nature. So like I said, wrestling with passages like that will bring us clarity, they won't bring us certainty.

The Impurity of War

"And as for you, remain outside the camp seven days; whoever has killed any person, and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves and your captives on the third day and on the seventh day. 'Purify every garment, everything made of leather, everything woven of goats' hair, and everything made of wood.'" Then Eleazar the priest said to the men of war who had gone to the battle, "This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD commanded Moses: 'Only the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, 'everything that can endure fire, you shall put through the fire, and it shall be clean; and it shall be purified with the water of purification. But all that cannot endure fire you shall put through water. 'And you shall wash your clothes on the seventh day and be clean, and afterward you may come into the camp.'"

-Numbers 31:19-24

Now that we have talked about some of the difficulties of this passage, let's focus on some of the main moral themes of this passage. The above verses contain a moral theme that is present throughout the law, and that is the inherent impurity that is contained in necessary human processes. For the Biblical authors, there is always an inherent tension that they have with the present world and the world to come. On one hand, the Biblical authors want to encourage people to enjoy the current world and to learn to honor God and draw near to Him within it:

"For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."

-1 Timothy 4:4-5

Passages like this were written to contradict many pagan ideas that the material world was insignificant and even distracting in regards to the world to come. But God wants us to know that His creation is indeed good and we are meant to cherish and honor the life that God has given to us. The ultimate expression of this comes from the incarnation in which God Himself participates in this life and even enjoys it. However, on the other hand we must be careful to remember that this present world is fallen, and we shouldn't consider this world to be our eternal home:

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

-Hebrews 11:13-16

The saints of old are called blessed specifically because they did not consider this earth to be their home, but longed for their eternal home with God. In various elements of the law this tension is not only shown, but it is embodied. Take child birth for instance. Obviously childbirth is a beautiful thing because we are bringing more life into this world, and this life bears the image of the Creator making this one of the most sacred acts a person can participate in. And yet, we are told in Leviticus 12, that a woman who has just born a child is ceremonially unclean and therefore can't enter into the Temple for a set number of days.

But why is this? If childbirth is such a sacred act, one would expect that a woman who just gave birth would not only maintain her ceremonial purity, but be one of the most worthy people to enter into the temple to worship God. Herein we see the tension of life on this earth. That while life is beautiful and sacred, in order to bring forth life, a woman must shed her own blood, which is a picture of death and decay. Thus all things are held in balance, the sacredness of the act is coupled with a reminder of our fallen state.

Warfare is in a similar category. Though war is commanded by God and is seen as necessary, there is something innately impure about it because it requires killing those who bear God's image. So even in wars that are directly sanctioned by God, and even commanded by Him, even to the point where the soldiers were accompanied by the priests and other holy instruments of worship:

"Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from each tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand."

-Numbers 31:6

Even so, the soldiers who carried out this action are considered unclean. In an even more extreme example of this take King David. Though David was flawed in many ways, he was ultimately a man after God's own heart and through arduous warfare, he brought about an incredible peace to the nation of Israel. And yet, when David tried to build a temple for God, God says this:

"And David said to Solomon: "My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build a house to the name of the LORD my God; "but the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have made great wars; you shall not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight.'"

-1 Chronicles 22:7-8

God is not condemning David's actions in his warfare, nor is God condemning the wars that David fought, but He is showing that war, although necessary, is also a defiling act. This is, I believe, a tension that every veteran of war innately understands, even if they can't fully articulate this phenomenon. In the ancient world, the way that they tried to deal with this tension was by constructing a worldview of honor and glory in which acts of warfare and bravery were looked at with such overt glory that it dulled the more terrible and shameful elements of war.

Even in the most famous book of the ancient world, Homer's "Iliad" and the sequel "The Odyssey", we see this tension even if he can't fully articulate or understand it. The

"Illiad" is filled with incredible battle sequences in which Homer shows both the incredible honor held by the Greeks and the Trojans. And yet, there is a strange shame to these depictions that Homer never really explores, nor does he seem to fully understand. This is why this book ends, strangely, not in the field of pitched battle, but in the burial rituals given to Hector. He also shows a strange shame towards the Greek victory by never giving a full account of how they won.

He instead gives this account as a brief flashback in "The Odyssey". There is also a strange shame given to Odysseus and the other veterans of this war in which they meet their heroic exploits with an equivalent amount of honor and weeping. He seems to suggest that this was sorrow for their fallen comrades, but I think a closer reading shows that this sorrow was for the warfare itself. This is why many veterans have read "The Odyssey" as a picture of how hard it is to "come home" after going to war.

The very act of taking life, no matter how justifiable and good, is innately traumatic and disturbing. It isn't something that we normally do, and it isn't something that can be classified as "good", it is only *necessary*. Take this quote from the final book of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy "The Return of the King" by J.R.R. Tolkien. It is important to note that Tolkien was a veteran from the first World War, and after the Hobbits return home after fighting in the war for Middle Earth, the main protagonist, Frodo, can't fully "come home". He is trapped in the pains of his past and can't come mentally return to the life of peace and safety contained in the Shire. When speaking to his best friend Sam, Frodo says:

"I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them."

-J.R.R. Tolkien - "The Return of the King"

The act of going to war, though it was a just war, still "defiled" Frodo's soul and made it impossible for him to return home. We see a similar image in this passage. After the war with Midian, the Israeli soldiers can't return home for seven days because they are considered unclean. Beyond this, all the items used in war, and captured through the war are equally unclean, needing to be washed and purified before they could be used for anything else. At the end of the chapter we see this point put in even stronger terms:

"Then the officers who were over thousands of the army, the captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, came near to Moses; and they said to Moses, "Your servants have taken a count of the men of war who are under our command, and not a man of us is missing. "Therefore we have brought an offering for the LORD, what every man found

of ornaments of gold: armlets and bracelets and signet rings and earrings and necklaces, to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD.”

-Numbers 31:48-50

Notice that this offering was made specifically to atone for the men who went to war. But why should these men need to be atoned for, using the treasure that they gained from fighting against the Midianites? The answer is in keeping with what we have said, though necessary, war is defiling and ugly. The way I try to put it to people is that war is not merely one form of evil, it is *every* human evil contained in one event and expanded on a scale that is almost unthinkable. It is killing, destruction of property, destruction of families, inflicting pain, subterfuge, and so on, all committed on a mass scale. And we ask young men and women to share in that hell to keep us safe. But we should never expect that they can engage in this behavior without being defiled by it.

This is why *any* depiction of war, no matter how “humanely” it is handled, and no matter how justified the war is, will always be seen as horrific and detestable, especially to those who actually fought in the conflict. But this tension is difficult for us to grapple with. Instead we want to see things simply. Either that war is only honorable and justified, or that it is only evil and detestable. The Bible asks us to see it as both, which is why the Bible can describe God as a “man of war”:

“The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will exalt Him. The LORD is a man of war; The LORD is His name.”

-Exodus 15:2-3

But at the same time can say that David was disqualified for building the temple because he waged war, and call the soldiers of this battle unclean for fighting within it. But this balance is exactly the type of nuance that we need to have in many areas of our lives. But I would argue that this balance is the only way that a soldier can recover from the horrors of war. If we try to convince soldiers that war is only good, they will either see war as good, which can make them violent, or it can create a fragmentation in their psyche as they find an innate contradiction between their conscience that is horrified by the actions of war, and their mind which is trying to convince themselves that there was nothing wrong in the actions of war.

It is only when we understand both that we can actually move on. We can see the horrors of war and grieve over their realities while also acknowledging the necessity of war and recognize the good that can come from it. I believe this is why the people of Israel take the gold given by the veterans to be a memorial to the people:

“And Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tabernacle of meeting as a memorial for the children of Israel before the LORD.”

-Numbers 31:54

The nation looked upon the gold taken in warfare and saw both. The gold represents the benefit that this war gave to them, but there is also a “stain” on this gold because it was given specifically by men seeking to atone for their actions in war. In order to overcome the darkness that we must face in this fallen world, we have to focus both on the tragedy of our circumstances and the good that comes from it.

But this principle holds for much of life, especially when it comes to justice. Take discipline as a key example. It is clear that parents are called to discipline their children:

“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.”

-Proverbs 22:15

And yet we see God grieve over the discipline of His own children:

“I would comfort myself in sorrow; My heart is faint in me. Listen! The voice, The cry of the daughter of my people From a far country: “Is not the LORD in Zion? Is not her King in her?” “Why have they provoked Me to anger With their carved images—With foreign idols?” “The harvest is past, The summer is ended, And we are not saved!” For the hurt of the daughter of my people I am hurt. I am mourning; Astonishment has taken hold of me.”

-Jeremiah 8:18-21

Although God acknowledges the necessity of His judgement, He equally mourns over the pain that it causes His people. A parent is asked to hold this tension in them whenever we discipline our children. If we fail to recognize its necessity, we will forego our parental responsibility, but if we fail to recognize its tragedy, we will become cold and unfeeling towards the pain we are causing our children. There are many more examples that I could give in this same vein, but let’s finish this study by focusing on the justice of God.

Divine Justice

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the children of Israel. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.” So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm some of yourselves for war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the LORD on Midian.”

-Numbers 31:1-2

The impetus for this war is in the context of divine justice. This is one of the more difficult aspects of the wars waged by Israel here and in the book of Joshua. These are not wars of defense, nor are they simple wars of conquest, these are specifically wars waged by the nation of Israel as divine judgement against the people groups who are implicated. But this gives a Biblical reason why this warfare is conducted in a more severe way than most of the wars mentioned in the Old Testament.

I will also note that the Jews recognized that these wars were unique and didn't fight like this ever again. This is important because we are not to take a general principle from this war in which we can confidently assert that any given nation is justified in extreme conduct because we are acting on behalf of God to judge wickedness. However, there is a sense in which we can understand this.

Even if nations are not given direct commands by God like Israel did here, there is a sense in which nations exercise justice in order to fulfill God's justice on the earth:

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

-Romans 13:3-4

This doesn't mean that the governments of this world, including the ancient Israeli government, were infallible, far from it. It means that they have a *responsibility* to carry out justice in a way that fits the nature and character of God. This again is difficult for the modern person. We like seeing God as a God of love and mercy, but we struggle seeing God as a God of justice and punishment. When God gave Midian a chance to see His people as being good, we see His mercy extended. Even when Midian tried to curse Israel through Balaam, God's wrath was not yet kindled and He was merciful to them, allowing them to hear the blessings over Israel from Balaam himself.

However, when they denied both of these things, and chose to entrap the Israelites and seduce them towards idolatry, God's mercy came to an end and now He institutes divine

justice against them, and this justice is harsh and severe. Once again, this doesn't mean that God relishes judgement, but it does show that justice is as fundamental to God's nature as is His mercy, and we are asked to reconcile these two elements of God's character.

This is something that we can understand in the Bible. Men like Habakkuk and Jeremiah struggled a lot with God's justice. They saw the punishment of their people and cried out for mercy that never came. On the opposite side of the spectrum we have Jonah. Jonah was not scandalized by God's justice, but His mercy. He wanted Nineveh to pay for their egregious crimes against many people groups in the region, including the Israelites. But God accepted their repentance and refrained from judgement.

This is where the ancient view of justice can be very helpful to us today. Today we tend to think of justice as primarily legal and as a response to a crime. The ancient world saw justice like this as well, but they saw it as a small part of a larger category, this category being peace or harmony. For the Jews, one of the most important concepts that they had was "shalom" or peace. This word meant more than merely a lack of violence, this word intimated divine order and harmony, that all things were as they should be.

Justice in this context is anything that maintains and encourages shalom, or peace. Injustice is then anything that violates this divine harmony and creates disorder. In this case, justice is bringing things back into their proper order. So let's think about this in terms of judicial justice. When someone violates the law they have upset the societal harmony through their behavior. In order to bring things back into harmony, justice has to even the scales which is why the judge in this case is there to decide, in accordance with the law, what punishment would adequately create harmony.

But this idea extends to all elements of life. It isn't just something illegal that is unjust, but anything that upsets this cosmic harmony is unjust. This is why the book of Judges is not about a group of judges sitting in a court room, but instead it is about military leaders in Israel who bring the nation back to peace after a period of oppression and warfare. This is what God's nature of justice is always aimed at doing. God is not bloodthirsty or tyrannical, but He can't abide any break with His cosmic order.

This is why a lack of justice, though it seems to be kind, is actually cruel. When justice is not administered, this disharmony is allowed to flourish. Sure it might seem more kind to let the Midianites off with a warning, but this wouldn't create harmony in the region. The Midianites violated their peace with Israel by trying to curse them and then by using subterfuge and deception to destroy the nation. These actions of aggression had to be answered for, and since the Midianites didn't solve this disharmony themselves by

repenting and making amends with the Israelites, God had to create this harmony through judging them.

This is again true throughout our lives. If we fail to administer justice, we are encouraging disharmony and chaos. It might make me feel better as a parent to simply overlook the behavior of my child, but this is allowing for the negative behavior to persist and grow. My supposed act of kindness is actually creating more problems and injustice.

It is for this reason that Biblical authors have seen our battle against sin as being a type of warfare:

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”

-Ephesians 6:12-13

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”

-Romans 13:14

Sin creates disharmony. It is a violation of God's law and therefore causes fragmentation in my relationship with Him and His creation. It is for this reason why God has to judge the sin in my life. This is why the cross was necessary. Evil could not be allowed to continue, sin had to be answered, and answered adequately. This is what the crucifixion did. It answered the world's need for justice and allowed God to forgive and preserve His people:

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

-Romans 3:23-26

Now that the blood of Christ has answered for our sins, we are still required to do battle with our sins. We can't allow for these sins to produce more and more disharmony in our lives and so we fight against our sins with the same level of prejudice and exaggerated force that the Israelites showed to their enemies. The result of doing this properly is that we achieve peace. Just as God created ultimate peace between us and

Himself, so we can participate with that peace by pursuing holiness and justice in our own lives.

But these principles of the beauty of sanctification and even the divine mercy shown to us is only possible when we first understand God's justice. When we understand the purpose of divine justice and the lengths that God went to in order to achieve it, then we can understand its importance and learn to live in light of this reality.