



Exploring tough questions  
facing youth today

# **GOD IS A WARRIOR?**

**Violence in the Bible**



The Pastoral Center

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## Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

### » OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

### » THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

### » WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

## More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit [GrowingUpCatholic.com](http://GrowingUpCatholic.com).



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

### >> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

**Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth**

# » GOD IS A WARRIOR? «««

## Violence in the Bible

### » INTRODUCTION

Is the Bible friend or foe to the peacemaker? How do we cope with the seeming contrasting pictures of a sectarian warrior God and a God of suffering, self-sacrificing love? The Bible challenges us to be reconciled to one another and to work for justice. Then what do we do with stories that either seem to condone violence or even to encourage it?

It's not hard to find graphic violence in the scriptures, along with a God who seems to sanction it. The stories of Israel's conquest of Canaan have such troubling elements; but the book of Judges is a reminder that this "conquest" was not as complete or as easily achieved as the writer of Joshua would have us believe.

Yet it is also in the Hebrew Bible that we find violence and injustice confronted and condemned as early as the stories of creation and as late as the ringing words of the prophet that nations will someday beat their swords into plowshares and study war no more.

When we encounter Jesus, we discover a God who has (mostly) retired the boxing gloves, and instead issued a call to nonviolence and unlimited love, except in some passages warning about the consequences in the after life for those who don't do God's will. While God incarnate in Jesus gives us the clearest image of God's love and character, we are still plagued with how to follow a Jesus storming through the Temple, or what to think about Jesus' disciples ready to call down fire on a whole village. What do we do when violence seems justified? When it has a noble motive? How will we live with hope when a violent world seems to be burning down around us?

Dedicated, Bible-reading Christians have come out boldly on both sides of the violence/nonviolence issue. Some point to stories of war in the Hebrew Bible as justification for their participation in war. Others cite Jesus' words and example to lay a case *against* war.

Youth, who are quick to detect inconsistency in what they hear, jump on this biblical dilemma. This unit digs deeper, however, to tell the "rest of the story," leading you and your youth to grapple with these tough questions with the help of new insight and information about the Bible stories of "violence." Perhaps you all will come to a new commitment to God's way of healing and reconciling.

### Preparation Alert »»»

A number of sessions ask for you to get information concerning contemporary situations in which violence is occurring. Some contacts are in the resources section below. You may want to browse through that list and supplement your resources (through Internet searches, libraries, etc.) before you start the unit.





## EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, participants may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 5**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



## THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** The story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

## » FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

## » TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

**1. Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to *draw attention* to the issue.

**2. Connect.** Invites participants to *express* their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also uses memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.

**3. Explore the Bible.** What does the Bible *say* about the issue? With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The Insights from Scripture section will help

clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.

**4. Apply** the faith story. What does the Bible passage *mean* for contemporary life? This is the “aha!” moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for *their* lives.

**5. Respond.** Why does the Bible passage *matter*? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? How can we *live* the faith story rather than pass it off as a mere intellectual exercise?

## » LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

## » INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

## » HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

Some of the activities in this unit were adapted from Eddy Hall's *Decide for Peace*, a study on conscientious objection to war.

## » BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Find a number of great options offered for sale by The Pastoral Center at <https://pastoralcenter/nonviolence>, including *What Pope Francis Says about Peace*, *Threshold Bible Study: Peacemaking and Nonviolence*, *The Beatitudes of Peace*, *Fatima at 100*, *Fatima Today: 10 Steps to World Peace*, many of the resources listed below, and more.

Catholic Nonviolence Initiative maintains a list of resources on peace and nonviolence at <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/resources/>.

The New Community Project maintains a reading list (<http://www.newcommunityproject.org/reading-list.shtml>) on earth care, global justice, and the process of change.

Butigan, Ken. *Nonviolent Lives*, explores the lives of dozens of modern-day nonviolent activists, from Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day to present-day leaders like John Dear, Anne Symens-Bucher, and Medea Benjamin.

Douglass, Jim. *The Nonviolent Coming of God*, is an exploration of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the nuclear age. The choice, he says, is between nonviolence and nonexistence.

Merton, Thomas. *Cold War Letters*, is a collection of personal letters written by the Catholic monk and peace activist to friends in 1961 and 1962, when censure by his superiors prevented him from publishing his ideas on nonviolence and peace any other way.

Merton, Thomas. *Passion for Peace*, is a collection of essays on the topic of peace and nonviolence.

Slattery, Laura, Veronica Pelicari, and Ken Preston-Pile. *Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living*, is a study program from Peace Bene for learning, practicing, and experimenting with the power of creative nonviolence to transform our lives and our world.

*The Power of Nonviolence*, is an anthology of writings by peace advocates put together by Beacon Press. Contributors include Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chenoweth, Erica and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, is a landmark scholarly work arguing that nonviolent movements for social change are twice as effective as violent movements in achieving their goals.

Easwaran, Eknath, *Gandhi the Man*, is an excellent biography of the man most responsible for introducing the world to nonviolence.



Grossman, Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Former Army psychologist documents a powerful disinclination against the taking of human life, even among soldiers.

Hartsough, David, *Waging Peace: Global Adventures of a Lifelong Activist*.

Sider, Ronald. *Non-violence, The Invincible Weapon?* A book full of stories of how nonviolent methods were successfully used to fight violence. It sounds a call for Christians to risk their lives, just as armed soldiers do, to serve in a nonviolent peace army.

*Ways Out: The Book of Changes for Peace*. Ed. Gene Knudsen-Hoffman. John Daniel & Co. Ninety-eight ideas for making peace.

## » AUDIOVISUAL RESOURCES

*A Force More Powerful* is an excellent video series, and would be a perfect compliment to this unit. The episodes are about 30 minutes each, and cover various nonviolent movements of the 20th century.

*Anybody's Son Will Do*, (<https://youtu.be/DSHdaJXK5go>) from Film Board of Canada, is available in six segments on YouTube. They take the viewer straight to Paris Island for a firsthand, upclose look at Marine Corps boot camp. Excellent counter-recruitment piece. 60 minutes.

## » ORGANIZATIONS

**Pax Christi USA** ([PaxChristiUSA.org](http://PaxChristiUSA.org)), 415 Michigan Ave. NE Suite 240, Washington, DC 20017 (202-635-2741).

**Catholic Nonviolence Initiative** ([NonviolenceJustPeace.net](http://NonviolenceJustPeace.net)), a project of Pax Christi International, Rue du Progrès, 323, B-1030 Brussels, Belgium (+32(0)2-502-55-50).

**Pace e Bene** ([PaceeBene.org](http://PaceeBene.org)), [info@paceebene.org](mailto:info@paceebene.org), (510-268-8765).

**Catholic Peace Fellowship** ([CatholicPeaceFellowship.org](http://CatholicPeaceFellowship.org)), P.O. Box 4232, South Bend, IN 46634 (574-339-1100; e-mail: [fornatl@igc.apc.org](mailto:fornatl@igc.apc.org)).

**Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR)** ([forusa.org/](http://forusa.org/)), P.O. Box 271, Nyack NY 10960 (914-358-4601; e-mail: [fornatl@igc.apc.org](mailto:fornatl@igc.apc.org)).

**On Earth Peace** ([OnEarthPeace.org](http://OnEarthPeace.org)), P.O. Box 188, 500 Main St., New Windsor MD 21776 (410-635-8704).

**Amnesty International** ([amnesty.org](http://amnesty.org))

**Christian Peacemaker Teams** ([cpt.org](http://cpt.org)), PO Box 6508, Chicago IL 60680 (312-455-1199, e-mail: [cpt@igc.apc.org](mailto:cpt@igc.apc.org)).

**Heifer International** ([heifer.org](http://heifer.org)), 1 World Avenue, Little Rock AR 72202 (855.9HUNGER, 855.948.6437).



## »» SESSION 1

# ALL THE KING'S HORSES »»

### »» KEY VERSE

And the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will hand over all of them, slain, to Israel; you shall hamstring their horses, and burn their chariots with fire." (Joshua 11:6)

### »» FAITH STORY

Joshua 11

### »» FAITH FOCUS

Following their exodus from Egypt, the Israelite people entered the land of Canaan, the land promised to them by God (Deuteronomy 6:22-23). But this area already had a name and it was already inhabited—by the Canaanites. If the Israelites wanted the land for their own, they would have to expel the original inhabitants by force. The kings of Canaan massed together against the invaders (Israel), but were soundly defeated by a military captain who ruthlessly followed the battle instructions of his God. How do we today understand God's seeming approval of violence as the primary means for the Israelites to take over the land of Canaan?

### »» SESSION GOAL

Lead participants to begin to reconcile two contrasting images of God: a "warrior" God and the God of love embodied in Jesus.



## TEACHING PLAN

### 1. FOCUS 10 minutes

»» **Option A:** Perform the skit "A Moving Experience" (first handout sheet).

Enlist the help of the junior high or other small groups to play the role of the conquerors in a skit. If this is not possible, the youngest members of the youth group could play this role. Provide the junior high leader with a script at least one week in advance, and encourage them to use props to enhance their role of "conquerors" (marching in, waving banners, etc.).

### »» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Contact junior high leader to combine groups for part of this session (see Focus)
- Copies of the handout sheets for Session 1 (*Option A* in Focus and *Option B* in Apply)
- Role of wide masking or duct tape to mark a playing area (*Option B* in Focus)
- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/marker
- Pile of fist-sized rocks or bricks, about one per person (*Option A* in Apply)
- Descriptions of "Warrior God" and "Prince of Peace" (*Option B* in Apply)
- Bibles
- Bible concordances
- Writing paper and pencils/pens (*Option B* in Respond)





**“To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.”**

Pope Francis  
Message for World Day of  
Peace 2017



As you open the session, give the participants copies of the skit, dividing the “current resident” parts among the group. (**Note:** If there are more than four participants who want to have a speaking part, divide parts accordingly, or double up if you have just one or two people.) Have them read the preface and briefly look over their parts prior to the arrival of the “conquerors.” Let the invasion begin!

Continue with **Option A** under Connect, below.

» **Option B** Play “Bump Out.” Mark a square playing area 10-15 feet across, smaller or larger depending on the size of your group. Divide into teams of four people each. Each team huddles together with arms locked inside the playing area. The goal is to bump all the other teams from the playing area. Last team inside the playing area is the winner.

Rules:

- Use only hips to bump out other teams.
- Arms must remain locked.
- Team is not out of the game until every member is outside the playing area. When that happens, the team sits and waits for game to finish.

(game adapted from *Screamers and Scramblers*, by Michael W. Capps)

Declare a winner, call them the “Israelites,” and continue with the short interview under Connect, **Option B**, below.

## **2. CONNECT 5-7 minutes**

» **Option A:** (At this point, junior high kids may either stay or leave. If they leave, omit questions pertaining to the “conquerors.”)

Process the skit by asking how both youth and junior high kids felt about their respective roles.

- How did you “current residents” feel about another group coming in and telling you they were taking over the room?
- You “conquerors,” did you feel a sense of power knowing that God had told you that the room was yours and that you would be able to easily drive out the people who were already there?
- How “fair” is it for one group to try to do it to another group?
- Do you know of places in the world where this has actually happened in history, or is happening now? (Examples include: Tibet’s occupation by China; Indonesia taking over East Timor; Europeans “conquering” the Americas.)

» **Option B:** Interview the “conquering Israelites,” asking, *Did you have any special technique for bumping that helped you win?* (Wait for response.) Then ask, *What if I, the leader, had told you at the beginning of the game that I really wanted you to win, that I was rooting for you, and would see that you win? Would that have made any difference to you? To the other teams?*

## **3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 10 minutes**

**Shift to this activity by saying:** *Invasion happens. But what makes it really potent is when one party believes that God is fighting along with them and for them. We have pictures of this “warrior” God in the Bible. Let’s see what one looks like....*

Read the story of violence aloud from Joshua 11:1-9. Then ask:

- What do you think the biblical writer is trying to convey here?
- Is this merely an example of the human tendency to glorify the past, making complex situations seem much more clear cut? Or is there something about how God is portrayed here that is at the core of who God is and what God is about in the world?

Solicit some responses, then offer these helps:

*We can take comfort that Jesus himself had to wrestle with some of these questions. Jesus stated more than once, "You have heard it said..., but I say to you..." Without throwing out God's revelation of the past, Jesus put God in a new light. It might be said that in Jesus we finally got a crystal clear look at God, rather than the portrait-shrouded-in-mist we had to go on in the past.*

Ask the group how they fit this picture of God—where God is actively involved in the destruction of another group—with the God they know through Jesus—where we learn that we are to love our enemies. Take a poll to discover the way various group members deal with these different understandings of God. Give as options the following:

- The understanding of God changed over the years, with people of an earlier time understanding God differently than people did at the time of Jesus.
- God changed over the years, realizing that violence was not the best way to achieve change in human life;
- The people who wrote this part of the Bible gave in to the human tendency to glorify their past, wanting to make it clear that God was with them every step of the way and justifying their entry into the promised land;
- These are just two sides of the same God—even today, God condones violence towards others as an acceptable way of dealing with other people or nations.

After reading the various options (and adding other choices), have the group rank the choices, giving the highest number to their favorite option. For instance, if there are four options, each person's top choice would receive a "four" and their lowest choice a "one." Add up the totals for each option, and divide by the total number of people in the group.

#### 4. **APPLY** 10-15 minutes

» **Option A:** Help the group explore how people today continue to think about God in the way that Joshua and the Israelites did. As each statement below is read, ask people to decide whether or not they agree with it. If they agree, they should stand and **pick a rock or brick** out of the pile (Stone Age weapons, remember?), and remain standing until the next question. If they *disagree* they should stay seated. Discuss each statement after the participants have indicated their agreement/disagreement with it.

1. God takes sides during a battle or war.
2. Many people in our country think that God is on our side, especially during a time of war.
3. If God were on anybody's side today, it would be on the side of the weak and poor, regardless of whether or not they believed in God.
4. People who fight a war thinking that God is on their side are likely to be more aggressive and fight with more vengeance than those who don't feel this way.

Continue with **Option A** under Respond, below.



**"The whole world must summon the courage and technical means to say 'no' to nuclear conflict; 'no' to weapons of mass destruction; 'no' to an arms race that robs the poor and vulnerable... Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus."**

The U.S. Bishops,  
*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, 333.



### » Option B: Hebrew Bible vs. New Testament

Before the session, make one copy each of the two descriptions on the second handout sheet. If your group is larger than 16, make two copies of each description.

Form two groups (four groups if you have more than 16 people). Give the “Warrior God” description to half the groups and the “Prince of Peace” description to the other half. Give the following instructions: *Have you ever felt that the Hebrew Bible and New Testament send out different messages about war and peace? Group one’s assignment is to make the case, using the Hebrew Bible, that it is God’s will for people of faith to fight in war. Group two’s assignment is to make the case, using the New Testament, that Jesus calls us to nonviolence.*

Say something like: *In this activity, you won’t necessarily be expressing your own views. Your assignment is to make the strongest case you can for the position assigned to you.*

Distribute Bibles and concordances. Give the groups about 10 minutes to prepare their presentations. Each group should select one or two people to present the case developed by the group.

Have the Hebrew Bible group present first, then the New Testament group.

Ask, *How do you explain the difference between what the Hebrew Bible says about war and the New Testament teachings that seem to point to a much different way of relating to enemies?*

The key insight: Though we may not be able to explain exactly why God raised the ethical standard for relating to enemies, Jesus clearly calls his followers to a different standard than that of the ancient Hebrew law. We do not have to be able to answer all the whys to know what Jesus calls us to do.

Continue with **Option B** under Respond, below.

(activity adapted from Eddy Hall’s *Decide for Peace*)

## »»» LOOK AHEAD

Next time we’ll look at the biblical notion of holy war, and God’s strange set of rules for fighting.



### 5. RESPOND 5-10 minutes

Remind participants that one part of God’s command to Joshua was that after the battle was over, the Israelites were to burn the chariots and disable the horses of the enemy. Why? Perhaps God wanted to keep the Israelites from learning to use the same weapons as their enemies. God wants victory to come because of the people’s faith, not because of their superior weapons. (Choose one of the options below.)

» Option A: Now use the rocks that symbolized weapons of destruction in “Apply” (above) to build something *constructive*. Choose a corner of your meeting space to build a monument to God—an altar. Joshua, too, built altars to God (Joshua 8:30), because he understood where his real power lay. Simply dry stack the rocks into a cone or square shape, then gather for a closing prayer around it. Ask God to teach us to trust our rock of salvation, and to help us transform weapons of destruction into monuments to peace. If possible, leave the altar standing as a reminder of this session.

» Option B: The governments of the world spend a tremendous amount of money on weapons. When nations consider reducing their federal budgets, cuts in “defense spending” are rarely considered. In what ways do such high levels of military spending actually lead to greater insecurity? How might our world be more secure if we instead focused on meeting people’s needs?

Do some Internet research. Include Catholic and other faith-based organizations listed on p. 3 to find out which military weapons systems might be being considered for cancella-

tion—or even being banned. Check out progress on a [worldwide movement to ban](http://www.icbl.org/media/342067/icb009_chronology_a5_v4-pages.pdf) the production of landmines, as these weapons live on long after the time of conflict is past, continuing to kill and maim civilians. ([http://www.icbl.org/media/342067/icb009\\_chronology\\_a5\\_v4-pages.pdf](http://www.icbl.org/media/342067/icb009_chronology_a5_v4-pages.pdf)) There is also debate about the use of [drones](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-rise-of-the-killer-drones-how-america-goes-to-war-in-secret-20120416) (<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-rise-of-the-killer-drones-how-america-goes-to-war-in-secret-20120416>) and their effect on [civilian noncombatants](http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-10-22/us-drone-strikes-are-controversial-are-they-war-crimes) (<http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-10-22/us-drone-strikes-are-controversial-are-they-war-crimes>).

Write individual letters (or [jointly sign a petition](#)) to government officials calling for [reductions in military spending](#) and/or a halt to the production of certain weapons that are especially inhumane.



## INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

When the people of Israel recalled this story of victory, they saw the Lord at the heart of the conquest. It was God who called Israel into the land of promise. It was God who routed their adversaries. It was God who approved of and even commanded the wholesale eradication of the enemy.

What do we make of this? Is this simply a different understanding of God? Is this one and the same God we know in Jesus of Nazareth? These are some of the questions raised by this account of victorious battle and others like it.

These questions are at the heart of questions of hermeneutics—the way we interpret the Bible. How do we deal with troublesome passages such as this one? Even those who do not find this passage troublesome must still deal with Jesus' teachings about enemies and violence, which seem to stand in direct opposition to a passage such as this one.

We aren't sure *how* the God we see revealed in the love of Jesus could be a God who would order the obliteration of whole peoples, including their animals and their property. But in asking this question, we must consider the likely motive for writing the story. The book of Joshua relates stirring battles and victories—victories in which God was seen to be active. That was a far cry from the prevailing religions, in which gods of stone needed daily placating. This God was *different*. This God *cared* about a band of former slaves. What better way to prove God's care than by delivering to Israel what slaves crave—power over their own destinies, their own land? These are epics, stories embellished by accounts of heroism, which also proclaim under no uncertain terms that Yahweh was the true living God.

## »» SUCCESS IN WAR?

In many ways, the story of Joshua's victory—no, *God's* victory—has its parallel in the words of blessing spoken of any modern nation's troops as they march off to war. When a president or prime minister or priest asks for God's protection and for the "success" of a war effort, are they not also asking for the destruction of the enemy—and for God to play a role in this destruction? In the late 1800s, American writer Mark Twain wrote a stunning piece called *The War Prayer*, in which a man stumbles into a church on Sunday morning and challenges the congregation to pray the "other side" of their prayers for military victory: for the destruction of people's homes, for the orphaning of little children, for the bloodying of teenage boys. Praying for one side to win means praying for the other side to be wiped out.



**War doesn't  
decide who's  
right. War  
decides who's  
left.**



It is a documented fact that wars are more brutal when the participants are motivated by religious convictions. This is as true on an interpersonal level as on the international level. A religious zealot brings a certain passion and disdain for the opinions—or lives—of others. Thus, passages such as this one in Joshua tend to mirror the way that human beings—especially religious ones—deal with their adversaries, and the role that they assign God in these conflicts.

Israel's God was a new revelation, and required a different standard in obedience and commitment: a two-way covenant. Such explanations do not wipe out our questions. But as Christian author Eddy Hall writes, "We don't have to understand God fully to know that Jesus calls us to a higher standard, a standard of loving our enemies and returning good for evil."

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE



# A Moving Experience

by David Radcliff



## SETTING:

The year 1200 B.C.E. The people of the Middle East are just entering the Iron Age (some are entering it faster than others). It is a time of great social and political change in the region.

## PLAYERS:

The **Israelites** (the “conquerors”): You were led by God out of Egypt 40 years ago and are finally getting what was promised—the land of Canaan (the youth room). In order to get what’s coming to you after all these years of wandering, you have been ordered by God to drive out all those who currently inhabit Canaan (the youth).

The **Canaanites** (“current residents”) have been living in this land (youth room) for some time. You are understandably perplexed and angered by the arrival of this new group who claims your room for their own. To make matters worse, these invaders say they are backed up by a God you never heard of.

## THE CONFRONTATION BEGINS:

**Conqueror 1:** O.K. you bunch of heathens, your time in this room is up! Be prepared to pack up and move out!

**Conqueror 2:** Yeah, because God has given us this room for our very own, and God has told us to drive out anyone who gets in our way.

**Conqueror 3:** In fact, God will be the one to personally see to your swift and violent end, should you resist.

**Conqueror 4:** Praise be to God, the great Liberator! (*shouts of praise from the conquerors*)

**Current Resident (C.R.) 1:** Could we hold on just a second here? There’s obviously a misunderstanding.

**C.R. 2:** Yeah, we’ve been here for quite a while and this room is home to us.

**C.R. 3:** And one might conclude that since we were here first, this room really belongs to us.

**Conqueror 2:** You’re the ones who don’t really understand the situation. Our God, the One True God, the God who liberated us from the junior high room [or other space], is now giving us the senior high room.

**C.R. 3:** Well, suppose we don’t know this God and don’t really believe what you’re saying?

**Conqueror 4:** Makes no difference. You guys are history in a few minutes.

**C.R. 1:** Oh yeah? Suppose we tell you that you don’t seem to have much in a way of modern weapons, and that we have a whole bunch of state-of-the-art horses and chariots.

**C.R. 2:** Yeah, like didn’t you people notice that the rest of the world had moved right on into the Iron Age? Look at you—no chariots, no iron spears—you’re from the Stone Age!

**Conqueror 1:** No problemo. We just happen to have the most powerful weapon of all—the Lord God Almighty. We may not even have to lift a finger to handle your measly chariots.

**Conqueror 3:** Enough of these pleasantries. You people need to clear out—or else!

**C.R. 4:** Maybe we’ll just take our chances with “or else”!

**Conqueror 2:** You’ll be sorry!



# Hebrew Bible vs. New Covenant



## WARRIOR GOD

"The Lord is a warrior" (Exodus 15:3). Debating position: God uses war to judge and direct nations. The Hebrew Bible shows that God sometimes tells people to take part in carrying out these purposes by fighting in war. Because we respect God, it is our duty to support war, which for some of us will involve fighting in war, when the war is for a just cause.

Related scriptures: Deuteronomy 2:14-15; 7:16; 20:10-20; Joshua 6:1-21; Judges 7:1-25.

## PRINCE OF PEACE

"He is named...Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Debating position: Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to overcome evil with good. He shows us how to do this, not only by his daily life, but by laying down his life for us, even when we behaved as his enemies. To follow Jesus is to fight evil as Jesus did, and not with violence.

Related scriptures: Matthew 5:38-39, 43-45; Luke 6:27-36; Matthew 26:52; Romans 5:8, 10; Romans 12:14, 17-21.