

The church has been taking part in a "Read through the Bible together" exercise. As we have read through I Samuel together, some difficult to understand passages have been encountered. In a recent Message, Greg Hall looked at one such passage in 1 Samuel 15:

### **Introduction:**

Our "Read through the Bible" is throwing up some issues that are puzzling. In this first sheet (and hopefully there will be more), we aim to give a little explanation to some of the issues that partners of the church have raised over the months. None of us have all the answers, so I apologise in advance for the shortcomings! It is not exhaustive, and just deals with some of the things raised. There is no substitute for a good commentary book, but hopefully this will help!

**1 Samuel 15: The Genocides and Judgements of God:** *There are many passages throughout the scripture where God orders a mass slaughter, or indeed sends a plague which kills many apparently innocent people, men, women, children, animals... Let the issue in 1 Samuel 15 stand as an example among many: Saul is ordered to attack the Amalekites, as a punishment for what they did to Israel when Israel came out of Egypt. He is told to totally destroy every person, male, female, children and infants, plus all livestock, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys. This Saul faithfully does, except that, bowing to the urging of his men, he spares some of the best of the cattle. For this sparing the cattle, he is judged and the kingdom is taken from him.*

There are no glib easy answers to these types of passage. If we believe the Word of God and that Samuel was a prophet, we have to believe that God ordered this slaughter and that He then judged Saul for not carrying on and killing all the cattle. Remember also that this generation of Amalekites were not those who attacked Israel as it came out of Egypt but their descendants, so the punishment is not even on those who did the act. There are probably two issues here: One, why the order for such a severe punishment, and secondly why such a severe judgement on Saul for what might seem a minor disobedience in the light of such a dramatic slaughter of people?

I am not sure anyone can answer these questions totally satisfactorily. In the Channel 4 play of last year, "God on Trial", where the inmates of Auschwitz put God on trial for "violation of the covenant", the prosecution sited this incident and many others, finishing with the accusation that God was powerful but not good. If we as Bible believers accept what the Bible says, that God is indeed Good, then there is only one conclusion that we can reach: that our definition of 'good' and His are different. His definition of 'good' includes these dramatic judgements. Let me try to put some ideas that I think might help us:

- **Cultural Issues:** God generally operates within cultural values. Ideas about God and concepts concerning His Nature are usually seen through a prism of the prevailing culture, and as a normal rule God reveals Himself according to the rules of that culture. At the time that these incidents take place, mass slaughters are much more common. War is commonplace and large numbers of casualties are normal. Furthermore there were fewer rules to war than we are used to in today's society. It is difficult to make these statements across cultures and so much history, but it would not have been so much of a shock, in terms of offence at the nature of God, to those who witnessed this at the time, as it is to us today.

Developing this still further, the society in which we live has a number of features which in terms of the history of the world and all the cultures that have existed, puts us at a very great distance in terms of values to these types of event, and possibly gives this culture the most difficulty of any in relating to such events. Postmodernity does not accept absolutes, certainly not divine ones, and puts a very high

value on human rights. Our ideas of God are extremely soft, in terms of kindness, grace, mercy, love and forgiveness. The idea of a God of judgement who kills and wounds is extremely culturally distant from us. Thus the values of our own culture and the ideas about God (where any ideas exist at all) are at an opposite pole to the God of wrath in the Old Testament. Taking European culture of only 100 years ago, this would have been much less the case. We only have to observe the verses of our own National Anthem (about scattering the queen's enemies), which are now normally omitted, to see that this is true. Having said that of course, the second world war only finished a little over 60 years ago, with the horrors of Stalingrad, the battle for Berlin and most of all the holocaust. In that short time however, we have begun to forget the effects of total war, as least as far as the experience of Western Europe is concerned. What we see on TV of Bosnia and Iraq is still remote from us, unless we are personally involved. Let us be clear, I am simply pointing out that we are all children of our times, and our times uniquely in the history of the world are poles away from the values that existed at the time of Samuel and the Judges. Along with that, our culture has led us to emphasise the personal aspects of God in terms of love and kindness at the expense of ideas of judgement. This is one of the reasons why we find these passages so difficult. We do have to bear in mind that much of the book of Revelation, with this God of Wrath is still to come!

- What would be gross sin for us is not sin for God: Hitler thought he could hold the fate of Nations in his hands, and for a while he did. So did many other rulers of the past. The difference is that God's motives are absolutely pure. Taking two examples: It would be very negligent of us to allow a wasp's nest to remain undisturbed in a place where children habitually had to walk and play. Our genocide of the wasps is from a pure motive of protection of the children. Or, maybe we discipline our children not to play with sharp knives, only to have them sob to us that if we loved them we would let them do what they liked. Maybe just two examples that let us see the motivations of God. We cannot do what He does, because basically we do not have the excellence of motive and pure goodness of heart to get it right. If God is Good, and the Bible insist that He is, then this must be an issue in this equation, however hard to understand. If God acts with severity, then there is no other way. He sees the end from the beginning.
- God does not tolerate sin. This is again a very hard one for postmoderns to accept. Our society does not accept absolutes or any kind of rules that seem to limit our great god of freedom. We need to understand that God means what He says. Sin is unacceptable. It will be judged in Christ. If we step outside of Christ then we better expect some hard discipline!

To finish, we need to look at the cross. Here we see both the kindness and the severity of God (Romans 11:22) in full measure, undiluted on full display. The kindness and mercy of a loving God towards a people who deserved wrath, pours out His full fury on His innocent and beloved Son, who is flogged to the point of death, nailed to a cross in the blistering heat of the day on full public display, mocked, disgraced and abandoned by the Father He had served all His life. If we want to get upset about the severity of God, then let us get upset about the cross, that brought us from sin and depravity and judgement, into His glorious presence and kindness. This is the greatest demonstration of the severity of God in the whole scripture. It shows us how God views sin and rebellion. Either our sin is punished on the cross in Christ, or it remains on us, and we can then see how it will be dealt with at the end of the age. We have to know both the kindness and severity of God. This is the Biblical balance. It is countercultural to postmoderns. But then, the kingdom of God is always a little countercultural!

**Greg Hall July 2009**