

# BIBLE STUDY GUIDE: WAR AND PEACE

(3rd edition)

by  
Rev. Daniel L. Buttry  
Peace Program  
National Ministries, ABC/USA  
Valley Forge, PA

**STUDY GUIDE  
WAR AND PEACE  
IN THE BIBLE**

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## **Introduction:** **How to Use This Guide**

For 2,000 years, Christians have reflected on the relationship of their faith to the violence of the world around them. Jesus came as Prince of Peace yet was tortured and executed under the authority of an occupying army. The tension between the teachings of Christ and the harsh realities of the world has led to a variety of Christian positions on war. Pacifists, just-war theorists, crusaders and liberation theologians all claim biblical roots for their teaching.

No time in human history has been more perilous than the late 20th century. While humanity has caused horrendous destruction and suffering throughout the ages, only with the invention of nuclear weapons and the amassing of huge stockpiles has humanity attained the capacity to totally exterminate itself. The threat of nuclear war has changed the nature of all war, for any regional conventional conflict has the capability to escalate into a nuclear war. The human race faces an unprecedented crisis to which the Christian Church must speak.

Does the Bible have anything to say on war and peace? Yes, far more than most people realize. As this study shows, the sheer bulk of Scripture on the topic gives much grist for the theological and ethical mills. However, as mentioned above, Christians have ended up on opposite ends of the spectrum regarding their views on war and peace, and everyone claims to be faithful to the word of God. This study gives you the opportunity to dig deep into the Scriptures yourself and wrestle with their teachings. Occasionally specific questions will be asked about application to contemporary situations. If we are to be “doers of the word and not hearers only” (James 1.22) what we learn from the Bible must be applied to a complex and messy world.

The study begins with the teachings of Jesus. This choice is carefully made and has implications for how we interpret the Bible. The basic Christian confession is “Jesus is Lord,” and Hebrews 1.1, 2 speaks of Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God. Jesus himself reworked Old Testament teaching in the Sermon on the Mount proclaiming authoritatively “...but I say unto you...” (Matthew 5.22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). To take the Lordship of Christ seriously and to uphold Jesus as the Word of God become flesh, we need to let Jesus be at the center of our interpretation of the rest of Scripture. Jesus is the light by which we can properly understand the Old Testament. God’s revelation is progressive; it unfolds throughout history. To see where it was heading, we look first at Jesus, then the divine direction can be more clearly apprehended through all the cultural and developmental limitations of earlier prophets and writers.

A problem will arise as the applicability of the Old Testament teaching to the contemporary world. There is the general issue of separating out God's message from the cultural particularities in which it was delivered and transferring it into our own cultural setting. Of special concern for this study, however, is God's relationship to the nation of Israel. The special nature of the covenant established a theocracy (God as ruler) which is unlike that of any nation-state since the coming of Christ. Though nations may assume they have a special divine blessing (i.e., many Afrikaners in South Africa, Khomeni's Iran, some Christians around the U.S.) there is no biblical foundation for such self-righteous and self-serving assumptions. How far, then, can God's injunctions for ancient Israel be applied in contemporary nation-states? This question can't be answered at the beginning, but should be kept in mind as you study the specific scriptural texts.

The study guide can be used by individuals or by groups. To use it most effectively in a group, members should read the passages before they gather so time can be spent interacting with the texts and each other. The guide is set up for a thirteen-week course of study, a quarter of the Sunday school year, with an optional session at the end to examine various positions on war and peace in light of the whole biblical study. However, there is far more material than can adequately be handled in thirteen sessions. Additional passages are marked for further study with questions to assist in digging out their meaning. Those who want to extend the time frame of the study could make extra sessions on these passages.

Finally, Paul's words to Timothy can prepare you for the study you are about to undertake: "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God's person may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3.16, 17). We have been given this revelation to shape our minds and actions to be more consistent with the will of God and the image God is recreating in us. This study is to teach us of God's values and desires, rebuke us regarding our worldly thinking, correct our mistaken notions and errant behavior, train us for an inner spirit reflecting Christ in our outward actions, and equip us for the work to which God calls us.

## **SESSION 1**

### **Jesus: The Sermon on the Mount**

The Sermon on the Mount is Matthew's collection of Jesus' teaching on "Kingdom" ethics. How does one live according to the values of the Kingdom of God or under the Reign of God? How are the disciples of Jesus to live? The Sermon on the Mount contains some of the best-known passages on peacemaking and nonviolence, providing a familiar starting point for this study. However, some people minimize the importance of these teachings, using a variety of theological and practical arguments: they are nice ideals but can't be rules to follow in the "real world," they only apply to interpersonal relationships, they are not valid for this dispensation, they govern our life in the church but not in the world. As one studies the Sermon on the Mount, it is clear that

Jesus was speaking about actions and attitudes in settings that included enemies, military occupation, poverty, persecution, lying, distorted sexuality, courts, prisons, and other elements of the “real world.” To take Jesus seriously study these teachings at face value, understanding their cultural setting, and translating them into contemporary contexts.

A. READ MATTHEW 5.3-11.

Who are the blessed ones? How do the Beatitudes compare to the world’s view of what works?

What does “peacemaker” signify in verse 9? Contrast peacemakers with peacekeepers. Why does Jesus say peacemakers will be called “children of God?” How does a peacemaker reflect the character of God?

The Greek word for “righteousness” in verse 6 is *dikaiosune*, which can also be translated “justice.” How would that translation effect the way we understand the verse? How would verse 10 sound in this light? Is it easier to see the cause for persecution?

Do the Beatitudes paint a picture of what normal discipleship should be or an ideal to which only a few may be called? Why?

B. READ LUKE 6.20-26.

How does Luke’s version expand our understanding of the Beatitudes? What are the contrasts Jesus makes in Luke between those who are blessed and those who receive the woes? How do these contrasts both

lead to conflict and result from conflict? What is the ultimate outcome according to Jesus?

C. READ MATTHEW 5.21-26.

How is Jesus' teaching different from the commandment against killing? How does Jesus go beyond that commandment?

Why is it so bad to call someone "fool?" What happens to our perception of the person we are insulting? What happens to our own souls? Why does Jesus link killing with the use of such names? Can you think of ways names or labels are used to assist in the process of killing people?

How are our relationships with others and our relationship with God interconnected? Why does Jesus tell us to leave the gift at the altar and be reconciled?

What is our responsibility in a broken relationship? Who is the injured party in Matthew 5.23? Compare this with Matthew 18.15. Who is the injured party there? How does reconciliation take place?

## **SESSION 2**

### **Jesus: The Sermon on the Mount (continued)**

The teachings in Matthew 5.38-48 are well known, frequently quoted, but seldom studied carefully or applied to contemporary life. The particular actions Jesus sets forth in verses 39-41 are easily misinterpreted without a knowledge of the cultural setting. Transferring an action from one culture to another can lead to vastly different interpretations of the action. For instance, slurping soup is a sign of bad manners in the U.S. but is a compliment to the cook in Japan. Brief notes about the cultural setting are provided to help in reflecting on the meaning of Jesus' examples of how his followers are to act in oppressive situations. Once we see the teaching properly in its cultural context, then we can translate the core meaning into actions appropriate for our own cultural setting.

- A. READ MATTHEW 5.38-42.  
Verse 38 refers to Exodus 21.24. What was the Old Testament teaching aiming to accomplish? What does Jesus call us to do?

Is Jesus telling his followers to be “wimps” or doormats? Why or why not? In verse 39 the Greek word for “resist” literally means “set oneself against.” The New English Bible translates the phrase: “Do not set yourself against...” The Greek word can also mean “retaliate in kind.” Do these perspectives from the Greek throw any light onto what Jesus is saying?

In verse 39 which cheek is hit? How does one hit that cheek (assuming the one hitting is right-handed)? Backhanded slaps were used to keep an inferior person in their place. How does turning one's cheek counter the attempt to humiliate and put the slapped person in an inferior position?

What is the setting for verse 40? Read Exodus 22.25-27 for a background to Jesus' teaching. A poor person is being sued for his cloak by a rich person, probably the landowner of the poor person's tenant farm. What would the poor person look like after giving both his garments? Where does the shame of nakedness rest in Jewish culture, on the one who is naked or on those who cause and witness the nakedness (see Genesis 9.22; Leviticus 18.6; and Job 22.6 for background)? Imagine the scene in court. What would be the impact of such an action?

Under Roman occupation, subjects could be compelled to carry baggage for a Roman soldier up to one mile. (See Mark 15.21 for an example of a Roman soldier commandeering a person to carry a burden.) What would the Roman soldier feel while compelling a Jew to carry his gear? How would the Jew feel? How might the feelings change when the offer was made by the Jew to carry the pack a second mile?

Does this teaching rule out protest against wrongdoing or injustice? Why or why not? What kind of protest could be allowed? How are the relationships altered by following the teaching of Jesus in this passage? Can you think of contemporary examples of people doing the type of actions Jesus is telling disciples to do?

- B. READ MATTHEW 5.43-48 AND LUKE 6.27-36.  
Who are your enemies? What does it mean to "love your enemies?"  
How is love communicated to our enemies?



Who is to be our pattern or example in loving enemies? In what way is love for enemies demonstrated by this one who is our example?

Contrast Matthew 5.48 and Luke 6.36. The Greek word for “perfect” signifies reaching an end or attaining maturity in contrast to our usage as totally flawless. What is the sign we have reached maturity in our Christian journey? What implications lie in Jesus’ use of the word “Father” at this particular point?

Does this teaching apply to personal enemies, national enemies, or all enemies? What would love for our national enemies entail? How is that love communicated? What would send a conflicting message to our enemies?

### **SESSION 3**

#### **Jesus: Cross-Bearing**

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the climatic events in the gospels. About one-third of each gospel occurs in the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. The cross is not only central in the work of Jesus, but also the dominant symbol in his call to discipleship. While Christ's work of atonement cannot be duplicated, he clearly intended his suffering and sacrifice to be an example for his followers.

#### A. JESUS' PASSION

READ LUKE 23.32-34.

What was Jesus' physical experience? How did he respond to those around him? Were those who received his forgiveness repentant or remorseful?

READ MATTHEW 26.50-56.

How did Jesus respond to his betrayal and arrest? Did he have other options? Why did he not take them?

What is the significance of verse 52? Does this verse imply that Christians should never take up weapons of violence? Why or why not? Read the story in Luke 22.49-51. Do you see any implications in Jesus act of healing in this setting?

B. "TAKE UP YOUR CROSS"

READ LUKE 9.23-24 AND LUKE 14.25-33.

(Parallels to Luke 9.23-24 are Matthew 16.24-25 and Mark 8.34-35.)

In Luke 9 Jesus' call to take up the cross follows immediately upon his prediction of his own death. What implications can be drawn from Jesus tying the call to crossbearing so closely to his own passion? What is our cross?

Luke 14.27 is the third time in Luke this saying is recorded. How does the context of this entire passage extend our understanding of our cross? What is the cost we must count?

Some people use Luke 14.31-32 to encourage arms build-up and military preparedness. Is this a valid sub-point of Jesus' teaching? Why or why not?

READ MATTHEW 10.34-39.

What is the sword Jesus brings? Is verse 34 a statement of Jesus' purpose and intent? If "yes," then how does this verse square with Luke 2.14? If "no," then how does the division and conflict come about?

What is to be the action of the disciple in this situation? What kind of attitude should we have? Do we bear the sword of which Jesus speaks? Can a sword and a cross be carried simultaneously? Which is the disciple to take up?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ MARK 10.35-45

(Parallel: Matthew 20.20-28). Contrast the thinking of Jesus with that of James and John. How does the world exercise power? What does Jesus seek to attain? How does he reach his goal? What explicit implications does Jesus draw out for his followers?

READ JOHN 18.36-37.

What is the nature of Jesus' kingship? Could a Christian bear arms for the sake of the gospel: i.e., to protect missionaries, to open the door to a "closed" country, to resist atheistic powers or a different dominant religion? Why or why not?

READ LUKE 19.41-44.

What does this incident reveal about the heart of God? What was the nature of the missed "visitation?" What are the "things that make for peace?" How could embracing those "things" change the outcome of history?

**SESSION 4**  
**Jesus: Another Side?**

There are a number of problematic and controversial passages in the gospels that raise questions about how far the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount can be applied. These tough passages round out Jesus' teaching by word and example. Divergent viewpoints of Christian involvement in war spring from the interpretation of these passages, requiring careful study to evaluate the ethical choices each position makes.

- A. READ MARK 11.15-19 AND JOHN 2.13-17.  
Would you describe this as an act of violence? Why or why not? What limits were there? Some people see the cleansing of the temple as an act of civil disobedience. Do you agree or disagree?

What implications for us can and cannot be drawn from this episode?  
How does this action compare with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount?

- B. READ LUKE 20.20-26  
(Parallels: Matthew 22.15-22; Mark 12.13-17).  
What was the trap set for Jesus? (Note the motivation set forth in verse 20.) How does Jesus avoid the trap?

What is Caesar's? What is God's? Does Caesar have any claim over God? Does God have any claim over Caesar? How would a conflicting claim between God and Caesar be resolved? Do you see any conflicting claims between God and "Caesar" confronting Christians today?

What questions does this saying of Jesus answer? What is left unanswered? How does Jesus mean for us to deal with the unanswered issues?

C. READ MARK 13.7-8

(Parallels: Matthew 24.6-8; Luke 21.9-11).

What significance do these sayings have? What kind of hope for the future do we have? Is Jesus suggesting that working for peace is futile? Why or why not? What, if anything, do these verses imply for our present-day actions?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ LUKE 22.35-38.

What is Jesus' point in verses 35 and 36? (Contrast with Luke 9.1-6.) What kind of a world will the disciples face following the crucifixion? Why does Jesus tell them to get a sword? Verse 37 seems to be Jesus' reason for them to get a sword: What does it mean?

Are Jesus' instructions literal or figurative? How do the disciples take him? Do they understand what Jesus is getting at? Do you?!

What does "it is enough" mean? For what are two swords enough? Does Luke 22.49-51 shed any further light on Jesus' intentions? Is Jesus calling an end to the discussion which the disciples misunderstood?

What implications can be drawn from this passage? What applications can be made, if any?

**SESSION 5**  
**The Apostolic Church: The Work and Example of Christ**

The centrality of the cross was noted in the study in the gospels. The apostles reflected further upon the nature of Christ's work at Calvary, including its significance for human relationships and the process of reconciliation. They saw the cross not only as opening up new possibilities for peace, but also as the example to guide us on how to go about achieving that peace.

A. READ EPHESIANS 2.11-22.

What was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles? What similar divisions between human beings come to mind? How are they different from and how are they similar to the Jew/Gentile distinction?

What did Jesus do on the cross to transform the relationship of Jews and Gentiles? How is Jesus our peace?

Does this passage have implications beyond the Jew/Gentile relationship? Read Galatians 3.28 and Colossians 3.11. Paraphrase these verses for our contemporary context.

How do we rebuild walls of hostility? How can we break them down?



What is the relationship of our citizenship in verse 19 to our national citizenship? How do we relate to Christians who are citizens of nations opposed to our own?

Does Paul's understanding of the cross have implications for our views on war? Explain.

B. READ II CORINTHIANS 5.14-20.

What was Christ's ministry as described in this passage? How was it accomplished?

What is our ministry? How do we experience that ministry? What is the extent of the "ministry of reconciliation?" Are there any limits? Why or why not?

How does Christ's death and resurrection affect our way of relating to other people? Why is this new perspective important for reconciliation?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ I PETER 2.18-25.

What do verses 19 and 20 assume to be worse than suffering unjustly? Is slavery to be tolerated or meekly submitted to? Translate this passage into a contemporary setting. What problems does such a translation raise? How might some of those problems be addressed by other teachings from scripture?

In what way is Jesus an example to us? Some people see Jesus' redemptive suffering in verse 24, linked with the suffering for doing right, as allowing for the suffering of nonviolent civil disobedience in an unjust situation. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

How does Jesus' example speak to Christians in positions of power or who are citizens of powerful nations?

**SESSION 6**  
**The Apostolic Church: Peacemaking and War**

In their ethical teaching, the apostles spelled out the way of peace, which followed the example of Christ, and the way of war. Note the echoes of the Sermon on the Mount found in the writings of Paul, Peter and James, indicating the importance of Christ's teachings for the ongoing life of Christian discipleship. Reflect not only on the actions, but also on the spirit that characterizes the followers of Jesus.

A. READ ROMANS 12.9-21.

This section of ethical teaching by Paul is introduced in verses 1 and 2. What does this introduction tell us about the nature of the passage?

List all the exhortations that relate to peacemaking. How can each of these be exhibited in your life?

Who exercises vengeance? What limits does this impose upon nations, if any? Explain your reasoning. To what extent can you take verse 18?

What is to be our response to evil? How is evil overcome by good? Does this passage have anything to say about the means one chooses to resist evil? Compare verse 21 to Matthew 5.39. What direction for Christians emerges by putting these two verses together?

B. READ JAMES 3.13-18.

Where and how do you see “earthly wisdom” operating? What roots of war are in such wisdom? What are the results?

What is heavenly wisdom like? What are its results? How is heavenly wisdom made evident or visible?

What does verse 18 have to say about the relationship between means and ends? How are God’s purposes achieved?

C. READ JAMES 4.1-10.

What does James put forth as a cause of war? Can you give some historical illustrations?

Compare verses 1 and 2 to James 5.1-6. How does the latter passage reflect the covetousness of 4.2? How does covetousness relate to injustice and rebellion? Put James 5 into contemporary terms. Can you think of situations today that parallel what James is talking about? Is God neutral in this case?

How does the second part of this passage (4.5-10) flow from the first part? Can you work back from the second part to the issues raised in the first four verses? What implications can be drawn out?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ I PETER 3.8-17.

What is the way of life? What does it mean to “seek peace and pursue it” (verse 11)? Compare this to Paul’s indictment of sinful humanity in Romans 3.17.

What kind of spirit is to characterize the Christian? Should we just suffer when we have been wronged?

**SESSION 7**  
**The Apostolic Church: Government**

The Apostolic Church presents two very different views of government and the relationship of the Christian to the ruling authorities. While each view has strict adherents within the church, perhaps the most helpful perspective emerges by holding them together in creative tension. There is a continuum of good and evil, the divinely ordained and the demonically inspired, upon which nations can be plotted. A caution is in order: Our assessment of each nation may reveal more about our own values, loyalties, and biases than about the biblical standards applied to nations.

A. READ ROMANS 13.1-7.

Who ordains government? Does this apply to all governments? Is every government legitimate? Why or why not? Can your statements be consistently applied no matter what government is being examined?

Should any government be overthrown? By what means? Democratic process? Nonviolent direct action? Violent revolt? Outside military intervention? Who determines that such actions are appropriate?

What does it mean to “bear the sword?” How is the sword to be used? How are abuses of this power to be countered?

Does verse 7 mean we should always obey our government? Why or why not? Are there any qualifications? Justify your position.

Some advocates of nonviolent civil disobedience claim they are “subject” to the governing authorities when they disobey, for they are willing to take the legal penalties. Do you agree that civil disobedience can be compatible with verse 1 or do you disagree? Explain.

B. READ REVELATION 13.1-18.

(Some scholars think Revelation 13 refers to Rome under the Emperor Domitian, others that it is the empire of the Anti-Christ just before Christ’s return, others that it is a symbol of all governments that exalt themselves and claim excessive authority.)

How are these beasts like governments? From where do they derive their authority? What is the relationship of the second beast (beast from the earth) to the first beast (beast from the sea)?

What do you think these beasts represent? Describe them in plain language? How would you define “civil religion”? In what way is civil religion similar or dissimilar to the portrait of the second beast?

What do the beasts require from people? What is the response of Christians to be?

READ REVELATION 17.6,13,14 AND 18.24.

How does the beast and the harlot relate to Christians? The original recipients of this book were under severe violent persecution by the Roman Emperor Domitian. How would they have heard these passages? What modern implications could be drawn?

C. COMPARISON OF ROMANS 13 AND REVELATION 13.

Paul wrote the letter to the Romans while Nero was Caesar, but it was prior to the severe persecution of the Christians by Nero following the fire that destroyed a quarter of Rome. Paul still had confidence in the integrity and fairness of the Roman legal system as evidenced in his appeal to Caesar (see Acts 25.11). So in approximately 60 A.D. when the letter to the Romans was written, Nero was not the notorious tyrant in the eyes of Christians which he was later to become. Domitian, on the other hand, persecuted Christians severely as a part of a broader "reign of terror." The book of Revelation was written while John was exiled as part of the Domitian persecution. Domitian also claimed to be a god and demanded worship while he was still living.

Compare the views of the state found in Romans 13 and Revelation 13:

Romans 13

Revelation 13

Government in power at writing

Source of authority

Who is punished

Purpose for use of force

Relationship to economy

Call to Christians



What summary statement could you make about governments as you contrast these two passages? What are the implications for understanding governments today?

All nations have elements of both Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in their governments, though some are far more unjust than others. In looking at governments, one must be wise and discerning. How do they relate to their own people? How do they relate to other nations? Who feels oppressed by their actions? Who benefits by their actions? Such questions can help in analyzing the nature of a particular government.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ I PETER 2.13-17.

What is the role of government? What does it mean to be subject to governing authorities?

What is the relationship between our attitude toward God and our attitude toward the government? What does this passage say to situations where the government commands evil? How does verse 16 fit into our relationship to the state?

READ I TIMOTHY 2.1-4.

For what are we to pray? Does this shed any light on the purpose or role of government? What if the government is waging war? What if the government is engaged in active repression of its own population? What if the government is facing civil war or threat of invasion?

READ ACTS 4.19-20 AND 5.28-29.

What relationship did Peter and John have to the governing authorities? What limitations did they see upon the extent of government's legitimate authority? This passage deals with the issue of direct witnessing to the gospel of Christ. What if the conflict with the government centers not on the speaking of the gospel but on living out certain implications of the gospel or ethical commands? What areas of conflict do you see arising between Christians and the government?

**SESSION 8**  
**The Apostolic Church: The War of the Lamb**

War images are used in the New Testament, especially in the Book of Revelation, to talk about the Christian life and the work of God in history. Militaristic language has entered our hymns and worship. But what do these images say about warfare itself and Christian participation in violence? A close examination may yield some surprising conclusions!

The Book of Revelation is the subject of widely differing interpretations. To wrestle with such disparate views is beyond the scope of this study. However, a great deal can be learned by examining individual passages to see what is clearly stated, so try to lay aside your particular viewpoint on Revelation or your fears about the book and look at it with fresh eyes.

A. THE BOOK OF REVELATION

READ REVELATION 12.7-12.

Who is the enemy in this heavenly war? How is the dragon defeated?

What are the key weapons in the fight against him?

What does this suggest about the nature of God's warfare? What are our own strategies to be?

READ REVELATION 16.12-21.

Who is involved in this battle? Are any kings or nations viewed as divine instruments or as on God's side? What is the nature of those who call for battle? Many people see verses 17-21 as describing nuclear war. How plausible do you think this interpretation is? Why?

READ REVELATION 19.11-21.

How is Christ portrayed? What is the sword coming from his mouth? How are the armies of the earth destroyed? Are any earthly nations on Christ's side?

Many commentators hold that Revelation is structured like a spiral with later passages covering the same ground as earlier ones only from a different vantage point. Some link 16.12-21 with the battle in 19.11-21. How does such a linkage affect the interpretation of what is going on?

B. THE EPISTLES

READ EPHESIANS 6.10-20.

How does Paul use war imagery to speak about the Christian life? Who is the enemy? What are the weapons a Christian employs? How are we to relate to people opposed to us? In warfare the enemy is often demonized or made to be completely evil. Does verse 12 support or counter such identification?

READ II CORINTHIANS 10.3-6 AND I PETER 2.11-12.

What is the nature of these two conflicts? What is the Christian strategy on both the external and the internal fronts?

Does any of the military imagery in the epistles advocate violence or Christian participation in war? How can this imagery be used to develop nonviolent alternatives in conflict situations?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ REVELATION 6.9-11.

What happened to the Christians in this passage? Why? What is the answer to their question?

READ REVELATION 20.7-10.

Some people used to identify Gog and Magog with the Soviet Union. What geographical and chronological problems in the text exist for that interpretation? (Ezekiel 38 and 39 also describe the destruction of Gog and Magog.) How is the battle won? Is any human intervention needed or mentioned? (The demise of the Soviet Union should, but probably won't, give caution to those who identify ancient biblical images with contemporary national entities in a literal way.)

READ I THESSALONIANS 5.8 AND II TIMOTHY 2.3-4.

What is the message in the use of these military images?

## **SESSION 9**

### **The Old Testament: The Beginnings of Violence**

The first eleven chapters of Genesis make a number of theological points regarding the human race by telling stories of human origins. Christians will disagree about how much is historical and how much is legend in these chapters, but the significance of the message remains. Observations about humanity are made which can speak to our contemporary situation however we interpret the historical veracity of these stories. Specifically, in this session, we will examine the rising tide of violence that comes from the introduction of sin into the world. Note the escalation from Cain, who murders his brother, to Nimrod, a conquering military king.

A. READ GENESIS 4.1-16.

What was at the root of Cain's violence? What was God's warning? How does sin consume a person? How does violence affect one's spirit?

What other elements are in Cain's act of murder besides the physical killing? What does Cain reveal about himself by his answer in verse 9? How does this attitude prepare the way for violence? What modern form does this take?

How does God respond to Cain's act of murder? Is there any mercy here?

B. READ GENESIS 4.23-24.

What is Lamech's philosophy? What kind of spirit lies at the heart of this man? What justifications are there for the escalation of his violence? Assess them morally. Where do these justifications surface today?

- C. READ GENESIS 6.11-13.  
What was the problem that caused God to destroy the earth in Noah's day? How would you define violence? Can violence be done legally yet be destructive of human life and well-being? What types of violence do you see in the world today?
- D. READ GENESIS 9.20-27.  
What kind of social condition did Noah institute? Was the curse upon Canaan rooted in the will of God or in an unrighteous cover-up of sin? Noah utters verses 26 and 27 as a blessing by God. Is it a word from the Lord or a spiritualizing of injustice? Explain your position. What systems of oppression exist today that have religious justification?
- E. READ GENESIS 10.8-12.  
Many commentators translate "mighty man" as "tyrant," a military despot. Does this understanding of "mighty man" fit with the rest of the description of Nimrod?

What empires did Nimrod lead or establish? (Note: Babel and Shinar are names given to Babylon.) What was the nature of these empires? Examine Genesis 11.1-9 to see what developed at Babel. (Note: In Assyrian and Babylonian art kings are often portrayed hunting lions.)

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ GENESIS 9.5-6.

What was the problem this legislation was trying to address? What is the underlying value being upheld? How does capital punishment as currently practiced support these values? How does it undermine them? Does the New Testament shed any light on our understanding of capital punishment? Does capital punishment counter or continue the spirit of violence?



**SESSION 10**  
**The Old Testament: The Conquest and Holy War**

The Old Testament is full of acts of violence, some clearly attributed to human brutality, but some attributed to divine command. These Old Testament passages about war are often used to support Christian involvement in the military and in national policies of military preparedness. The relationship between armed violence and divine action in the Old Testament needs to be explored in two distinct but related areas: the biblical/ theological area and the area of application. First we study the biblical texts to understand what they actually say and what they mean in the light of their historical and cultural contexts. But before application can be made, especially on the theme of “Holy War,” another issue must be examined. No nation today can legitimately claim the place of ancient Israel in God’s salvation history. Divine commands regarding holy war must be viewed within the context of God’s unique role for Israel as a vehicle for God’s revelation to humanity and the climax of that revelation in the coming of Jesus Christ. Then we can begin the task of making any application of the message of the Old Testament to the question of violence and contemporary nation-states.

- A. READ DEUTERONOMY 7.1-5.  
Where were the Israelites coming from? Who had delivered them from their bondage?

What is commanded? Why is the violence so extensive? What is God’s concern?

Can this command be adapted to contemporary life? Why or why not? What reasons have been given for genocidal actions or threats in modern times? Assess the morality of these reasons.

READ DEUTERONOMY 7.17-26.

What does God promise Israel? What is God's role in the warfare? Is Israel called to engage in a drive for military superiority? How will they be victorious?

B. READ DEUTERONOMY 20.1-9.

Deuteronomy 20 gives us the "laws of war" for Israel. What kind of military mindset should the Israelites have, according to these laws? Why? What is God's role?

What kind of army is formed? Who is excused? Why? Why is it possible to diminish the army by such extensive exemptions? How would this look in contemporary terms? Should it be applied today? Why or why not?

READ DEUTERONOMY 20.19-20.

Why is this consideration given? Put it in contemporary terms.

C. READ DEUTERONOMY 28.7.

What is the blessing? What is the condition for the blessing (see verse 1)? Given what you know about the whole Mosaic Law, what are the implications of these verses for Israel's genuine national security? Are there any contemporary implications?

READ DEUTERONOMY 28.25-26, 47-57.

What is the curse? What is the reason for the curse (see verses 15 and 47)? Can God work through the enemies of Israel? What are the implications of this for Israel's warfare?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ DEUTERONOMY 2.26-3.11.

These are two specific instances of the Israelite conquest. Picture the events in your mind. How would they be viewed today? What justification can they have? Can this justification be used in any contemporary setting? How legitimate is it?

READ DEUTERONOMY 20.10-18.

What laws are given here? What do you think and feel about them?

**SESSION 11**  
**The Old Testament: God as Warrior**

Though the Old Testament contains many accounts of battles, including battles waged under divine command, the warfare of Israel is surprisingly non-militaristic. God is revealed as a warrior, in fact as The Warrior. Israel's role was always a supporting one rooted in their trust in God rather than trust in military superiority. It is easy to just look at the surface of violent actions and fail to see the deeper direction God was taking. In the development of progressive revelation (God unfolding the divine message a part at a time), we see an intermediate step between the arrogant aggression of Lamech and Nimrod and the sacrificial love of enemies in Jesus Christ.

A. READ the following passages and fill out the chart on pages 36 & 37:

EXODUS 14.1-15.21 (Battle at the Red Sea)

II CHRONICLES 20.1-30 (Battle against Moabite, Ammonite, Syrian Alliance)

FOR FURTHER STUDY, read the following passages and add their data to the chart on pages 36 & 37:

II KINGS 6.11-23 (Siege of Dothan)

II KINGS 6.24-7.20 (Siege of Samaria)

II KINGS 18.13-19.37; ISAIAH 36 AND 37 (Siege of Jerusalem)

ALTERNATIVE FOR A GROUP: Each member could take one of the above passages, read the text, fill out the chart and report to the group on what was learned.

TEXT

MILITARY SITUATION

PROPHETIC WORD

EXODUS 14.1-15.21

II CHRONICLES 20.1-30

II KINGS 6.11-23

II KINGS 6.24-7.20

II KINGS 18.13-19.37

ISAIAH 36 AND 37

ACT OF GOD  
OUTCOME

ACTIONS BY PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

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What do these stories tell about the power of God? What was the key to victory? What was the appropriate involvement of the people?

What is God called in Exodus 15.3? Does God's action in war increase or diminish Israel's militarism? How is this different from calling for religious blessing upon a military action?

B. READ the following passages and fill out the chart on pages 40 & 41, using the same format as in the previous section:

JOSHUA 6 (Battle of Jericho)

JUDGES 4.11-5.31 (Deborah and the Canaanites)

JUDGES 7 (Gideon and the Midianites)

FOR FURTHER STUDY read the following passages and add their data to the chart on pages 40 & 41:

EXODUS 17.8-13 (Defeat of the Amalekites)

JOSHUA 10.1-15 (Battle against the Amorites)

I SAMUEL 7.5-13 (Samuel and the Philistines)

II KINGS 3 (Moabite Wars)

What is the key lesson in these battles? What was God's role? What was Israel's role? How do you think this perspective on the history of Israel affected the messages of the prophets?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

DAVID'S VIEW OF WAR: READ I SAMUEL 17; PSALMS 20; 21; 18.34; 144.1,2 (especially I Samuel 17.45-47 and Psalm 20).

What was David's relationship to God in his warfare? How can we be sure we are right if we take such a viewpoint? What does Psalm 20.7 mean practically?

READ II SAMUEL 24.1-14 AND I CHRONICLES 21.1-13.

What was the "numbering of the people" in modern terms (look at II Samuel 24.9 to see the intended results)? Why was God angry about it? What were the dynamics behind David's action? How does this contrast with the passages above? Why do you think David changed?

READ I CHRONICLES 22.6-10.

Why was David not allowed to build God's house? Why was this a disqualifying reason?

TEXT

MILITARY SITUATION

PROPHETIC WORD

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JOSHUA 6

JUDGES 4.11-5.31

JUDGES 7

EXODUS 17.8-13

JOSHUA 10.1-15

I SAMUEL 7.5-13

II KINGS 3



ACT OF GOD                      ACTIONS BY PEOPLE OF ISRAEL  
OUTCOME

## **SESSION 12**

### **The Old Testament: Judgment and Trust**

The prophets of Israel declared God's word against the prevailing sins of their day. Besides injustice and idolatry, militarism was a frequent topic. The links between militarism and idolatry were explicitly made, for the root of the issue is whether one trusts God or trusts in one's own strength and piety for protection. The quest for power also was tied to exploitation of the poor. In the prophetic vision, justice and peace go hand in hand (see Psalm 85.10-13, for instance). God did not view the condition of Israel and the surrounding nations as a neutral observer or passive bystander. God was the judge who would hold nations and people accountable for their actions. Though only Israel and Judah were held accountable for their religious beliefs, being people of the covenant, all the nations were held accountable for their injustice and violence.

A. READ ISAIAH 31.1-3 AND HOSEA 5.13-14. (FOR FURTHER STUDY: READ ISAIAH 30.1-7,15-18; 20.1-6; HOSEA 7.11; EZEKIEL 29.6-9.)

Are these messages merely practical military and political advice, or is there a deeper issue at stake? What is the deeper issue you see, if any?

Why do the prophets disagree with the governmental policy? Does their advice have any bearing on contemporary international politics? How or how not? How can striving for a superior alliance of power undermine social values? To what degree does it matter?

B. READ HOSEA 10.13-15 AND PSALM 33.16-17.  
Why are military armaments a vain hope? How do they deceive people into trusting them? What does it mean to "trust" in armaments? Can a nation pursue a major armament campaign, yet not "trust" in its military strength? How or how not?

What is the significance of “because” in Hosea 10.13? Compare Hosea 10.13-14 with Matthew 26.52. How does taking the sword and trusting chariots lead to the destruction and death foretold?

READ HOSEA 1.7; 14.1-3 AND ISAIAH 26.1-6.

How does God deliver? How does Hosea 1.7 square with the history of Israel studied in Session 11? What are the elements of trust in the Lord?

Isaiah 26.3 is usually recited in a personal sense. What indications are there in the text of a broader meaning of “peace.”

What are the consequences of our choices made regarding where our trust shall be place? Can this be applied today nationally? Personally? How? To what extent?

C. READ JEREMIAH 8.8-17; MICAH 5.10-15; AMOS 2.6-16. (FOR FURTHER STUDY: READ AMOS 3.9-11 AND ISAIAH 59.7-8.)

In Jeremiah 8.11, what is the false peace based upon? Why is God's judgment coming? Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "There is no peace without justice, and no justice without peace." Discuss the interrelationship between peace and justice in light of the prophetic teaching.

What are the reasons for judgment in Micah 5.10-15? How are horses and chariots parallel with idols?

What are the reasons for judgment in Amos 2.13-16 (look at Amos 2.6ff)? What is the value of military might in the face of God's judgment?

What reasons for judgment do the prophets highlight which are present today? Where do you see these sins? What message would the prophets bring to our society?

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ HABAKKUK 2.8; 3.8-15; EZEKIEL 32.17-32; JOEL 3.9-16; JEREMIAH 50 AND 51; NAHUM 2.13.

What nations receive these words of judgment? Why does God's judgment strike these nations? How is God's judgment fitting for the crime? Do you see any contemporary ways this judgment is fulfilled?

READ ECCLESIASTES 9.18.

What is this verse saying to us? How could you interpret it in terms of current affairs?

READ I SAMUEL 8.4-22.

What was the spiritual issue behind the choice of Israel for a king? How does a king's way of war differ from God's. What is the relationship between king and people regarding war and the military as presented both by Samuel and by the people of Israel?

**SESSION 13**  
**The Old Testament: God as Peacemaker**

The prophets revealed a God who not only judged the nations for their injustice and violence, but who was actively involved in making peace. God is identified as the destroyer of the weapons of war and the war machines of the nations. The promises of God point to a coming age of peace and security, justice and prosperity, which will be ushered in by the coming Messiah. God's redemptive goal for human society is set forth, and there are specific exhortations to the people to engage in efforts toward that same end.

A. READ HOSEA 2.18 AND PSALM 46.9. (FOR FURTHER STUDY READ PSALM 68.30; 76.1-6; 140.1,2; AND ISAIAH 43.14-17.)

What is God's role in each of these passages? Why are weapons and warriors in general destroyed or rendered impotent? What do these passages reveal about God's will for humanity?

How does Hosea 2.18 relate to Hosea 2.14-17? What is the nature of the new covenant God makes? Why is the abolition of war a part of the covenant?

Psalm 46 is often used to minister to individuals in times of stress and turmoil. How does verse 9 expand the meaning of the whole Psalm? How can verse 10 be understood following immediately after God's destruction of the weapons?

B. READ MICAH 4.1-5; ISAIAH 11.1-10; 32.14-18. (FOR FURTHER STUDY READ ISAIAH 2.1-4; 9.2-7; 60.15-18; 65.17-25.)

What is the vision of the future in these prophetic messages? What are the preconditions for peace? How is peace established? What human action is involved in this process? What divine action? From where does security come?

Can these preconditions for peace be established to some degree now?  
How would they work or not work?

- C. READ PSALM 34.11-14.  
How does true piety manifest itself to the world? How active is our peacemaking to be? How should our personal actions contribute to peace?

READ PROVERBS 25.21-22.  
How is the enemy to be treated? Verse 22 probably refers to the Middle Eastern custom of carrying a bowl of coals as a sign of remorse or repentance. This evolved into putting ashes on one's head. What happens to the enemy in response to the actions suggested in this passage? How do such actions transform hostile relationships? Why?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

READ JOSHUA 22.10-34.  
What was at the bottom of this conflict? Did the 9-1/2 tribes west of the Jordan understand the eastern tribes? How do false assumptions affect conflict?

Why didn't the tribes go to war? What dynamics do you observe in their negotiations? How did they resolve their conflict? What lessons regarding conflict resolution can be drawn from this incident between the Hebrew tribes?

READ ISAIAH 19.19-25.

What is the vision of the future in this passage? How did Egypt, Assyria and Israel relate to each other in Isaiah's day? How would Isaiah's prophesy have sounded in his hearer's ears? What would be a contemporary version of this message?



## **SESSION 14 (optional)**

### **Summary**

Throughout church history different positions have been taken regarding the involvement of Christians in war. Basically three main traditions have emerged: pacifism, just war, and the crusade. There are many variations within each of these broad streams of thought. In recent years a clearly identifiable fourth position has been developed: liberation theology.

#### I. Pacifism

At the core of pacifism is the refusal to take human life. Christians are called to suffer rather than inflict suffering. Pacifists can base their beliefs on a strict interpretation of the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, or upon a form of Christian humanism. The pacifist witness is diverse, including those who withdraw completely from society and those who are active in political affairs through nonviolent means and democratic participation. The early church was predominantly pacifistic in outlook until the time of Constantine (A.D. 313); since then pacifists have been a significant minority among Christians.

#### II. Just War

When Christians emerged as leaders in the Roman Empire, they had to grapple with war and military violence from a new perspective. They argued that though war is evil, it can be justified under certain specified conditions and must be conducted according to certain standard of morality. Augustine developed the initial statement of just war theory which has since been refined by many theologians and philosophers. Christians have a God-ordained responsibility to the state and to the maintenance of its security and order; therefore Christians can participate in appropriate state violence but under moral constraints. This position has been held by a majority of Christians since Constantine. A significant number of modern just war theorists are nuclear pacifists, though others support a policy of deterrence.

#### III. Crusade

The crusade perspective developed in the Middle Ages when Christians fought Moslems for control of Jerusalem. War could be God's will, and Christian participation was therefore a divine calling. The enemy was under divine judgment and deserved to be destroyed through warfare. Although few Christians hold this position theoretically, in the midst of conflict many will practically embrace it to provide sanction for their nation or group's involvement in violence.

#### IV. Liberation Theology

In the 1960's many Third World theologians and church leaders began to call for Christians to be active participants in processes of liberation for oppressed peoples. They saw the Exodus as the primary "salvation event" in the Bible, and saw engagement in issues of justice as central to faithful Christian living. Some liberationists combined their thinking with traditional pacifism and advocated strategies of direction nonviolent action. Others developed a variation on just war, holding that a just revolution could legitimate Christian involvement in revolutionary violence. The "guerrilla/priest" became the symbol of this latter position.

What biblical support could each of these positions gather? How valid would their interpretation of scripture be in light of your study of this topic? What problems do you see with each position in terms of its understanding of the biblical teaching? What problems arise practically for each position? How can people holding each of these views deceive themselves or use their position to self-righteously cloak aggression or irresponsibility? Which is the position you favor? What actions and commitments does this call you to take today?

Pacifism

Just War

Crusade

Liberation

How does the advent of nuclear weapons change our understanding of war? Albert Einstein said, "The splitting of the atom has changed everything, save our mode of thinking, thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe." What is the "mode of thinking" Einstein was referring to? How can we change? How should we change?

READ JAMES 1.22-25.

Reflect on the entire study you have undertaken. What is God saying to you about your responsibility in the world today? Sketch out some follow-up steps you will take to be a "doer of the word and not a hearer only."

APPENDIX  
For Further Study

The books listed below present a variety of perspectives on the scriptures and Christian responses to war.

Aukerman, Dale. Darkening Valley: A Biblical Perspective on Nuclear War. New York: Seabury Press, Inc., 1981.

Bainton, Roland. Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960.

Barrett, Lois. The Way God Fights: War and Peace in the Old Testament. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987.

Barrs, Jerram. Who are the Peacemakers? The Christian Case for Nuclear Deterrence. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983.

Bernbaum, John A., ed. Perspectives on Peacemaking: Biblical Options in the Nuclear Age. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984.

Buttry, Daniel. Christian Peacemaking: From Heritage to Hope. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1994.

Clouse, Robert G., ed. War: Four Christian Views. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-  
varsity Press, 1981.

Craigie, Peter C. The Problem of War in the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978.

Eller, Vernard. War and Peace from Genesis to Revelation. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981.

Holmes, Arthur F., ed. War and Christian Ethics. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975.

Lind, Millard C. Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980.

Lutz, Charles P. and Folk, Jerry L., eds. Peace Ways. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983.

Payne, Keith B. and Payne, Carl I. A Just Defense: The Use of Force, Nuclear Weapons and Our Conscience. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987.

Stassen, Glen. Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

Villa-Vicencio, Charles, ed. Theology and Violence: The South African Debate. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987.

Wink, Walter. Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1987.

Winn, Albert Curry. Ain't Gonna Study War No More. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Yoder, John H. The Politics of Jesus. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES ON PEACEMAKING:

Peace Program  
National Ministries  
American Baptist Churches  
P.O. Box 851  
Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851



National Ministries Literature Resources  
American Baptist Churches, USA  
Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851