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Title: "The Hardest Passage in the Bible"

Scripture: Deuteronomy 21:10-14

Summary: Two secret practices to help you understand the difficult parts of the Bible.

### The Most Offensive Passage in the Bible

Deuteronomy 21: 10-14. "When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, <sup>11</sup> suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, <sup>12</sup> and so you bring her home to your house: she shall shave her head, pare her nails, <sup>13</sup> discard her captive's garb, and shall remain in your house a full month, mourning for her father and mother; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. <sup>14</sup> But if you are not satisfied with her, you shall let her go free and not sell her for money. You must not treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her." "

Did this manage to offend everybody? If you win a battle, go through the spoils and see a woman who is attractive. She happens to have been married to a man you just killed, but don't let that bother you. Send her home, have her change her clothes and do her nails—because that makes everything right for a woman, right?—(are we all quietly throwing up?) give her a month to get over it. Then go have sex with her, make her your wife. But if she doesn't satisfy you, if it doesn't work out, don't sell her as a slave--because that would be degrading. Just give her a divorce and let her go.

What do you do with a passage like this? There are some hard, hard words in the Bible. How do you deal with them?

Let me offer some guides for how to read the Bible.

1. Recognize that Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture. The overall theme of Scripture is the redemptive activity of God through Jesus Christ. When reading scripture, keep Christ in the center. Remember the overall theme. Here's the entire Bible in ten seconds: God made a good world. We messed it and ourselves up. God came in Jesus to put us and it back together again." Read every passage in the Bible with regards to how it relates to that theme.

Ever see this portrait, or one like it? It's an uncanny likeness, though it is made by hundreds of tiny photographs. The photographs each have their separate picture, but you need to look at the entire portrait to make any sense of each one.

2 Focus on the plain meaning of the passage. The words usually mean pretty much what they say. Especially what they meant to the original recipients. Finding out the original meaning of the passage helps determine its original meaning.

Another way to say this is: Try to understand not only what the passage is saying, but also why.

Mom runs in the morning. This time of year, are you going to take your run in the afternoon? “About to leave for school in the morning, Cathy found this note on the kitchen table: “Please don’t lock the door when you leave.” To be sure she didn’t forget, Cathy taped the note to the garage light switch. When Carl left after dinner to go to the lake for the weekend, he saw the note in the garage. Of course, being an obedient son, he left the door unlocked. Over time, the family understood this unchanging truth: Mom doesn’t want the door locked. When the thief arrived at 3:00 one morning, he easily entered the house.” It’s crucial to understand the original meaning for the original recipients. And the “why” behind the words.

So what do we do with that awful passage from Deuteronomy 21? Why would the Bible say such a thing? What did it mean to the people to whom it was first written? Ancient Near East war meant that if you crushed somebody in battle, everything they once had is now yours to do whatever you want with. This passage is a “Rules of Engagement” article. It seems odd that if you’re killing people, you have rules about it, but we do. The ancient rules were almost anything goes. If you defeat your enemy, everything he had is yours; you find one of his wives attractive, she’s yours. Period.

This passage sets some limits: “bring her home and have her shave her head”. That’s a sign of mourning. She has emotions. Recognize that and give her some time to grieve. That is acknowledging her as a human being. That makes it a radical idea for that time. A woman is not an object you can do whatever you want with; you are to treat her as a human being. This was a massive new concept—“Wait—she is not an object; she’s a person?” You are neither to keep her as a slave nor sell her for money as property. In this passage, you are to let her go free. You are to give her a certificate of divorce, which means you are to give her legal standing.

In the time this passage was formed, this passage expressed a huge movement forward. A long ways to go; primitive and barbaric, but it’s actually a click forward. Deuteronomy 21 was a radical step forward for women’s rights *for its day*. We’ve made a lot of steps since; we have a long way to go.

Does that change the thrust of this passage for us? It may teach that when we are the victors, remember that our enemies—even our defeated enemies—are human beings. Treat them like human beings.

The Bible was written by real people for real people, in real places at real times. It wasn’t somebody being called into a dark closet where God dictated eternal precepts word for word out of the blue.

“Why didn’t God just skip over those barbaric times and give us the “advanced” form of truth?” Civilization has advanced a tiny bit since those days. Deuteronomy 21 sounds brutal to us; why didn’t God have the Bible contain the advanced version?

Why didn't you skip middle school? Why didn't you skip being seven? The Bible is for real people in real places at real times, not perfect people in Camelot. The Bible depicts how God relates to *you*. You can't skip steps.

A better question is, "Why did people find this/that story meaningful? Why did they preserve it and pass it on?" Start with the human and you'll find yourself encountering the divine. We're a messy, ugly, bloody, beautiful, compassionate, loving people, and the Bible reveals a messy, ugly, bloody, beautiful, compassionate, loving story of God dealing with us, reaching out to us, helping us grow and live into more and more life.

To read some passages of the Bible as literal, eternal truths and apply them to our day would be to take a step backwards. In this case, a huge step. Instead, ask "What was the original meaning in the original context?" Back in its day, it somehow advanced the motif of love and grace. To take it literally might be to take love and grace a step back. Is there a kernel of love and grace that can be distilled and applied? As you do, you approach the true meaning of a Bible passage.

Now you see the truth about me regarding the Bible. I read the Bible in the light of love and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. It is not, for me, a book of ancient laws whose details apply to us today. It is a record of God working to nurture and advance human beings in the love and grace that is seen in its purest form in Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Savior. That's how these two principles of how to read the Bible dance together.

One more example: do you know the story of Abraham and the time he came very close to sacrificing his son, Isaac, in order to please God? (It's found in the first half of Genesis 21.) What a primitive, barbaric story. What kind of man sacrifices his son? What kind of God asks him to do such a thing?

What was going on when this story happened? How did the world view God in those times? Look at something that is missing in the story. When God tells Abraham to offer his son, does Abraham say, "What are you talking about? That's crazy! No way!" Instead, Abraham just starts out to do it. He doesn't ask for instructions or directions. If Abraham doesn't need any instructions, then apparently this was something he had seen done and knew about.

In the ancient world, you had to appease the gods, who had a tendency to be irritable. You needed to keep them happy with you. You did this by offering them something valuable. People were constantly offering tribute and sacrifice on an altar to keep the gods happy. And you never know where you stand with a god, because it seemed that the gods were always unsatisfied.

So child sacrifice is always lurking just off-stage in the scriptures. Ultimately a god is going to expect you to offer your most valuable thing, which would have to be your first-born, wouldn't it? Notice what is not in this story of Abraham and Isaac. When Abraham was told to offer his first-born, nobody raised an eyebrow. Why is that? Why was nobody bothered by this insane idea? Because that's what *all* the gods asked of you. It was all about you providing a sacrifice to keep the gods happy. But in this Genesis story, just as Abraham is about to offer his son, *this God provides a lamb*.

This may be the second hardest story in the Bible. Some people use this very story to demonstrate how primitive the Bible is. This completely misses the point of the story. The story is

telling you about a new kind of god, a God who *doesn't* demand your first-born. This God provides an animal.

Is this primitive and barbaric? Sure. But for those people, it is a major, gigantic step forward. This story moves us from a god who demands you to provide for the gods in order to earn their favor. This story depicts a God who provides for you and insists that you already have this God's favor. Instead of asking what you have to do to make the gods happy, this God says, "I have already provided. Can you trust me?" A mind-blowing new idea in human history. This story asks, is there someone out there trying to get us? Or is there someone on our side. It is a quantum leap forward.

When someone argues with you that the Bible is the perfect, eternal word of God. (The word for that is "inerrant".) That's arguing for the wrong kind of Bible. Rick Warren, that incredibly successful pastor of Saddleback Church in California, offers his sermons to us fellow preachers. For a small subscription, we can download his material and Warren not only gives permission, he encourages us to preach his sermons. What do you think? Should I do that? He's a great preacher; it would be a step up. And a lot easier on me.

I'm not going to do that; I don't think you'd want it. Because the sermons you get from me are mine, and they are for *you*. If my preaching has any effect at all, it's because we know each other, and because here it gets very personal.

Rick Warren can offer his sermons for all of us to preach in our churches because he apparently believes that the truth is the same always, everywhere, to everybody. I believe the truth is more than that; I believe the truth is personal. I believe this truth—the Bible—is personal as well. It is *not* one size fits all; it is Gods' word for you and me. Deuteronomy Chapter 21 does not mean for us what it meant to an ancient Near East warrior. But it still has meaning for us. "The grass withers and the flower fades; but the word of the Lord abides forever." It also shifts and bends and acclimates because it is alive. It is Spirit-breathed, not set in stone.

Do you believe the Bible is eternally perfect and unchanging every way? The better question is, do you believe the Bible is living, relevant, breathed by God's Spirit and has amazing power to change lives.

Can I get a tiny "amen" to that?