



When God Commands Violence

The One
Thing That
Changes
Everything

Christian Philosophy Academy

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When God Commands Violence

*The One Thing That Unlocks Peace with Old Testament
Violence*



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The Problem You're Facing

If you've picked up this guide, I likely know what's bothering you. You love God, you trust the Bible, but there are passages that make your heart sink and your mind reel.

When you hear God issue a command like, "Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant" (1 Sam 15:3), you feel trapped between three choices:

1. **Defend the violence** → You feel intellectually dishonest, like you're making excuses for something that seems obviously wrong such as baby killing
2. **Reject the passage** → You feel spiritually unfaithful, like you're undermining the authority of Scripture and thereby undermining a key pillar of your faith
3. **Ignore it** → Gloss over the tough commands, but the questions won't disappear, and your faith feels incomplete and fragile

Here's what I've discovered. *What everyone else tells you to do doesn't work.* "Just have faith" feels hollow when your conscience is screaming. "God's ways are higher" doesn't address your real moral concerns. "Don't question God" makes honest questions

feel unfaithful.

But what if I told you there's a way out of this impossible choice? What if the very thing that's making you uncomfortable is actually pointing you toward the solution?

In my years of studying these passages, I've discovered something that changes everything. It's so simple you might initially dismiss it. But once you see it, you'll never read these passages the same way again.

The Revolutionary Insight

Here's the key distinction that changes everything. Every divine action in Scripture has two distinct components that you need to separate:

- TARGET = What God is aiming for (the virtue goal)
- MODE = How God accomplishes it (the cultural method)

Here's what happens when you read difficult passages: your mind is actually processing both components simultaneously, but you don't realize it. You're having two reactions at the same time:

- *TARGET Recognition*: Something deep inside you says "I can see why justice, protection, faithfulness would be good goals here."
- *MODE Disturbance*: Your moral sense correctly identifies "But this method to hit the target seems immoral."

Here's the breakthrough: **Both reactions are correct.**

You don't need to suppress one to validate the other.

Think about it this way: if you yell harshly at your child to get them away from a dangerous dog, your TARGET (protection) is purely good, even though your MODE (harsh yelling) might seem “mean.” The protection goal validates your action, while your gentler instincts correctly identify that yelling isn’t your ideal parenting method.

Now you’re probably thinking, “That’s a nice distinction, but how does it actually help with the really disturbing passages?” Let me show you exactly how this works with one of the most troubling passages in the entire Bible.

How it Works

Let me show you how the Target-Mode distinction works by way of 1 Samuel 15:3.

- **The Disturbing Divine Command:** “Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.”

When you read this, your stomach probably turns. But watch what happens when you separate the components:

TARGET Analysis (What God was aiming for):

- **Justice:** The Amalekites had specifically attacked Israel’s most vulnerable people (the elderly, sick, and stragglers) during the Exodus when Israel posed no threat to them.
- **Protection:** Preventing future unprovoked attacks on God’s people by a persistently hostile nation.
- **Faithfulness:** God was keeping an ancient promise of judgment that He had made generations earlier.
- **Covenant Integrity:** Teaching Israel that complete obedience to divine authority is non-negotiable.

MODE Analysis (Cultural limitations):

- Ancient Near Eastern warfare conventions that Israel knew and expected.
- Limited options for dealing with persistent national threats in a world without international law.
- “Total destruction” hyperbolic language that was standard military rhetoric in that culture (similar to how we might say “we destroyed them” about a sports victory).
- Harsh methods reflecting the brutal realities of ancient survival.

You might still question the distinction. You might say, “I can see the need for justice and protection, but total destruction seems wrong.”

Here’s the liberating upshot. Both parts of your response show your moral sense is working perfectly. You’re recognizing genuinely good targets while correctly identifying that the methods are harsh and problematic. You don’t need to suppress either reaction.

Now, I can imagine what you’re thinking. You might be willing to accept this distinction for most of the passage, but there’s one part that still makes you cringe. Let’s address the elephant in the room.

The Hardest Question: What About Innocent Lives?

Let's be completely honest about the directive to kill innocents. 1 Samuel 15:3 reads: "[P]ut to death men and women, children and infants." Kill all the adults, kids, and babies? Yikes!

This violates what philosopher Raymond Bradley calls:

- *The Crucial Moral Principle*: It is morally wrong to deliberately and mercilessly slaughter men, women, and children who are innocent of any serious wrongdoing (2003: 144).

This principle seems like a decent candidate for a universal moral truth. Intentionally killing innocent humans seems morally wrong, everywhere and always. Plus, based on something like this principle, your stomach turns and your conscience screams "This can't be right!" when you read 1 Samuel 15:3.

So you might be thinking, "Even if I can accept the Target-Mode distinction for warriors and combatants, how can any TARGET justify the deliberate killing of children and infants? A morally perfect God would never command such a thing.

Isn't the Target-Mode approach just trying to avoid an error that's clearly stated in the text?"

This is the hardest question. I want to address it directly rather than dancing around it.

First, let's be honest about what the text appears to say. The command does explicitly mention "children and infants." I'm not going to pretend that's not deeply disturbing or try to explain it away with easy answers.

But here's what I've learned from studying these passages in their original context:

1. **Ancient Warfare Rhetoric vs. Literal Description:** These accounts use the standard hyperbolic military language of the Ancient Near East. When we read "utterly destroyed all," it's similar to how a modern sports commentator might say "they destroyed them" after a 49-7 football game. Archaeological evidence from sites like Jericho shows much more limited destruction than the language suggests.
2. **The Corporate Nature of Ancient Judgment:** In ancient cultures, cities and nations were understood as organic wholes. When judgment came upon a society that had become systematically corrupt, it affected everyone within that system. God working through this cultural understanding doesn't mean endorsing it as eternally ideal.
3. **The Giver of Life and Human Mortality:** There's a crucial theological distinction between humans taking life (which we have no right to do) and God, as the giver and

sustainer of all life, determining when earthly life ends. Every person who has ever lived has died or will die. God is sovereign over the timing and circumstances of death in ways that humans are not.

4. **The Trajectory Toward Jesus:** These harsh methods in the Old Testament create a stark contrast that makes Jesus' approach, loving enemies, protecting the vulnerable, offering grace to all, shine even brighter. The progression from corporate judgment to individual mercy shows God's increasing revelation of His preferred methods.

The key insight: I'm not asking you to feel comfortable with these passages or to think they represent God's ideal methods. Your moral discomfort with the explicit mention of children and infants actually proves your conscience is working correctly. But I am suggesting that God can accomplish genuinely good targets (justice, protection, covenant faithfulness) even through the harsh limitations of ancient judgment systems, while pointing toward something better.

This doesn't make it easy. It doesn't remove all the mystery. But it does allow you to maintain both your moral sensibilities and your trust in God's ultimate goodness.

Before we move forward, I need to tackle two more objections that are probably forming in your mind. These are critiques that could undermine everything we've discussed.

Two Objections Addressed

The Target-Mode distinction naturally invites two key objections. Here's what they are, and here's why I don't think they work.

Objection 1: This Is Just “Ends Justify the Means”

A natural worry is, “This sounds like you're saying God's good purposes justify any harsh method. That's classic ‘ends justify the means’ thinking, which is morally problematic.”

Why this misses the point: I'm not arguing that good ends justify harsh means. That would indeed be problematic. Instead, I'm making a more nuanced claim.

When I say God's goodness is secured in what He's targeting, I'm not saying the harsh methods are morally ideal or that the targets make the methods acceptable. I'm saying that God works within the moral and cultural limitations of human societies while still accomplishing genuinely virtuous goals.

Think of it like this: when God chose to speak Hebrew instead of creating a new perfect language, He wasn't endorsing every

limitation of Hebrew grammar. He was working within existing communication frameworks to accomplish His purposes. Similarly, when God worked through ancient justice systems, He wasn't declaring them morally perfect. He was accomplishing virtue goals through the available cultural means.

Your moral discomfort with the harsh methods actually shows you understand God's heart. You're sensing that these methods don't represent God's ultimate preference. You're right.

Objection 2: Couldn't God Have Used Gentler Methods?

Someone might say, "If God is omnipotent, couldn't He have achieved His goals without warfare? Why not cause the Canaanites to leave peacefully, send plagues, or use some other supernatural method that didn't involve human violence?"

The answer: You're right that God could have used other methods. God's omnipotence means He had countless options available. But here's what I've learned: omnipotence doesn't mean every theoretically possible option is *wise*. There are important reasons why God chose to work through existing cultural frameworks rather than circumventing them. Here are four such reasons:

1. **Respecting Human Agency:** God typically chooses to work through human instruments rather than bypassing them. By doing so, God maintains the dignity of human participation in His purposes.
2. **Pedagogical Purpose:** Israel needed to learn specific

lessons about obedience, dependence on God, and the seriousness of covenant commitment. These lessons could only be learned through their own actions and choices.

3. **Natural Consequences:** Evil cultures often face judgment through the very violence and injustice they've normalized. When God works through existing justice systems, He maintains the crucial connection between choices and consequences. This teaches both the perpetrators and observers that actions have real moral weight.
4. **Covenantal Consistency:** God had specifically promised to give the land to Abraham's descendants through their own conquest of it. Changing the method to pure supernatural intervention would fundamentally alter the covenant structure itself and the lessons embedded within it.

The key insight: God's choice to work within cultural limitations isn't evidence of divine weakness or lack of options. It's evidence of divine wisdom that serves larger purposes while still accomplishing genuinely good targets.

Now that we've worked through intellectual challenges, you're probably wondering: "This all makes sense in theory, but how do I actually use this when I'm sitting with my Bible open to a difficult passage?" You need practical tools, not just philosophical frameworks.

Two Questions That Unlock Any Passage

Now I want to give you a practical tool. Instead of asking “How can I defend this method?” (which puts you in an impossible position), ask these two questions:

Question 1: TARGET Question

“What good thing was God aiming for in this passage?”

I want you to look for these kinds of targets:

- Justice - holding wrongdoers accountable
- Protection - keeping innocent people safe
- Faithfulness - keeping promises and commitments
- Holiness - maintaining purity and separation from corruption
- Wisdom - teaching important principles
- Love - pursuing ultimate blessing and good

You'll be amazed! You'll always find genuinely virtuous targets that your moral sense immediately recognizes as good.

Question 2: MODE Question

“How was this method limited by the cultural situation?”

Here I want you to consider:

- What were the available options in that culture?
- How does Ancient Near Eastern context explain this approach?
- What harsh realities made gentler methods impossible or ineffective?
- How does this prepare the way for better methods that come later (especially in Jesus)?

You'll always discover cultural constraints that explain why harsh methods were used, even when they weren't ideal.

The Result:

- *Question 1 validates God's goodness:* You'll always find genuinely good targets).
- *Question 2 validates your moral concern:* You'll always see cultural limitations that explain the harsh methods.

These two questions might seem almost too simple, but they're incredibly powerful. Once you start using them, you'll discover that they don't just help you understand difficult passages. Instead they transform your entire relationship with Scripture, with your own conscience, and with God himself.

What This Changes for You

This transforms everything about how you relate to difficult passages and your own faith.

- **Before:** “I have to choose between my conscience and my faith”
- **After:** “My conscience is leading me to understand my faith correctly”

Your Relationship with Difficult Passages Changes

Instead of approaching them with dread, you can approach them with curiosity. Instead of feeling like you need to defend harsh methods, you can explore how they point to God’s goodness. Instead of feeling shame about your moral concerns, you can feel confident that those concerns prove you understand God’s heart.

You’ll start asking different questions. You’ll ask, “How is this passage pointing me toward God’s goodness?” rather than “How can I make this seem less problematic?”

Your Relationship with Your Moral Sense Changes

Your conscience stops being your enemy in biblical interpretation. It becomes your trusted ally. Instead of suppressing your moral intuitions to maintain faith, you integrate them as essential tools for proper understanding. The confusion disappears because both your heart and Scripture are pointing toward the same God.

Your Relationship with God Changes

You can trust both God's goodness and your moral sense simultaneously. You're no longer afraid you'll have to choose between faith and conscience. The doubt transforms into assurance because you see that God is actually working with your moral intuitions, not against them.

In Bible Study

You can read difficult passages with genuine curiosity instead of defensive dread. You can help others learn to distinguish between targets and modes. You can demonstrate how moral concerns actually confirm faith rather than threaten it.

In Conversations with Skeptics

You can honestly acknowledge that harsh methods are genuinely problematic (which validates their concerns) while showing how the underlying purposes are genuinely good (which points toward God's character). You can explain biblical development from harsh modes to Jesus' perfect demonstration

of how love actually works.

In Your Personal Faith

You can trust that your moral discomfort is evidence for God's goodness, not against it. You know that both Scripture and conscience point toward the same magnificent God. You can rest in confidence that you don't have to choose between using your brain and maintaining your faith.

All of this transformation sounds wonderful, but I know that when you're actually sitting there reading a disturbing passage, you might forget everything we've discussed. You need something you can reference quickly in the moment when doubt starts creeping in.

Quick Reference Guide

When You Encounter a Difficult OT Passage

STEP 1: Notice your reaction.

- What feels right about this? (TARGET recognition)
- What feels wrong about this? (MODE concern)

STEP 2: Ask the two questions.

- “What good thing was God aiming for?”
- “How was the method limited by cultural situation?”

STEP 3: Trust your moral sense.

- Your discomfort with harsh methods = correct moral calibration.
- Your recognition of good purposes = correct spiritual discernment.

STEP 4: Rest in the insight.

- God's goodness is in what He's targeting.
- Your peace comes from seeing those targets are always genuinely good.
- Your conscience and your faith are allies, not enemies.

REMEMBER: The very thing that was threatening your faith is actually confirming it. Your moral sense isn't your enemy. It's your guide to proper interpretation.

When Doubt Creeps Back In

Remember these things:

- Harsh methods ≠ harsh purposes
- Your conscience and Scripture are allies
- God's goodness is in what He's targeting
- Better methods come as culture develops
- Jesus shows God's preferred method
- Your moral sense helps you interpret correctly

You now have everything you need to approach any difficult Old Testament passage with confidence instead of dread. But before you close this guide, I want to make sure you understand just how significant this breakthrough is, not just for your Bible reading, but for your entire faith journey.

The Bottom Line

Here's what I want you to walk away with: Your conscience and Scripture are allies pointing toward the same God whose goodness is so complete that it can accomplish virtue goals even through the harsh limitations of ancient cultures. The passages that once troubled you most can become your favorite examples of how God's goodness shines through even the most difficult circumstances.

Your moral conscience was never the problem. It was always the solution. God gave you that sense of right and wrong precisely so you could recognize His goodness when you encounter it. The fact that you're troubled by harsh methods while recognizing virtuous purposes means your moral sense is calibrated correctly to God's character.

Trust it. Use it. Let it guide you deeper into understanding both Scripture and the God who inspired it.

The struggle that brought you here has become the strength that will carry you forward. Welcome to freedom. Welcome to peace. Welcome to faith without compromise.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The peace you can experience from this one insight is just the beginning. If understanding the Target-Mode distinction has helped you this much, imagine what would happen if you had a complete toolkit for handling every challenging passage in Scripture. Stay tuned for more details.



About the Author

I'm a Christian with a PhD in philosophy. I've spent years developing the Covenant Virtue Ethics method through rigorous study and countless conversations with people wrestling with these exact questions. My goal is to help Christians like you engage with Scripture's toughest challenges while maintaining intellectual integrity and biblical authority.

This guide introduces one key component of that method. But there's so much more. The complete framework provides sophisticated tools for handling any difficult Bible passage.

If this guide has helped you find peace with Old Testament violence, imagine what the complete method could do for every other challenging passage that's ever troubled you.

For complete training in handling any difficult Bible passage, visit www.ChristianPhilosophyAcademy.com to learn about the full course.

You can connect with me on:

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