

Why Does God Allow War? - Martyn Lloyd-Jones

From whence come wars and fightings among you?
Come they not hence, even of your lusts
that war in your members?
James 4:1

It is interesting and strange to note in what may be termed the religious attitude towards war, or the attitude of religious people towards war, two tendencies almost invariably manifest themselves.

The first is the tendency to discuss the whole question of war almost entirely apart from God, or at any rate in a manner in which the problem of war is only related to God in a very indirect manner. Regarding war only and solely from the human angle, those who take up this attitude are very concerned about, and preoccupied with, the various problems of human conduct that are raised by war. They are much interested in the question as to what the Christian's attitude should be, that is, as to how war should affect man. They try to discover the causes of war in general, and any particular war that may take place. They immerse themselves in political, economic, psychological and philosophical theories which claim that they hold the key to the mystery. And they try to apply this knowledge to any concrete instance.

Having done so, and believing passionately that it is the business of religion to produce a just and a lasting peace, they proceed to discuss the various measures that should be adopted in order to bring that to pass. In this group are to be found those who style themselves pacifists as well as many who are definitely not pacifists. The interest is primarily and almost entirely in war as it affects man, and especially the man who claims the name of Christian.

Should he take part or not?
What kind of peace terms should he advocate?
etc., etc.

Such are the issues which are uppermost in their minds; and even though they may stress and emphasize the spiritual or the Christian aspect, as they see it, to the maximum, still it is true to say of them that the question of the direct relationship of God to war is practically never considered by them at all.

That they may reply to the effect that of course they have taken that as a fundamental postulate, and have assumed that the very idea of war is abhorrent to God, and of necessity has nothing to do directly with God because it is the result of man's sin and folly that they say all this, far from disposing of what we have said, rather tends to confirm it. God's attitude to war is taken for granted and is therefore not discussed; war is regarded as a problem which is altogether and entirely on the human plane and level — a merely human question and problem.

The second tendency is the exact opposite. Here, the one great interest is the question of the direct relationship of God to war. In a subsidiary way, those who belong to this group may also be interested in some of the questions to which we have referred. But their one big problem, their real difficulty, is not "How does war affect man?" but rather,

How is war to be fitted in to God's governance of this world?

In a word, what perplexes these people most of all is not the explanation of the origin of war or their own immediate duty with respect to it: what they desire to know is "Why does God allow or permit war?" That to them is the question of all questions, because on the answer to it depends the whole of their belief in God. And obviously, if that is in doubt, all other questions become somewhat irrelevant and unnecessary.

We are concerned in this study with this second attitude. We have been considering together in the previous sections various problems with regard to the general difficulty of understanding God's ways. In all those instances we have been concerned most especially with the subjective problem of God's dealing with us directly. But here, at this point, we come to a more objective problem. It may be that at the back of it lies the subjective question of why God allows war in view of what it means to us; but the question in the forefront is certainly the strictly objective one of

reconciling our belief in God
with the fact that God allows war.

I have the impression, whether rightly or wrongly I do not know, that it is not being asked quite so frequently as in the past. If so, I fear it is due to the fact that godlessness has been greatly on the increase, and also to the fact that, in our preoccupation with ourselves and our own actions, much of our religion has become godless and has degenerated into a mere matter of attitudes, opinions, ideas and actions. However, there are many who are asking the 'question today, and it is therefore our duty to deal with it.

Why does God allow war?

The people who ask this question can, I believe, be classified into three main groups. First of all we have the type who ask it rather defiantly and arrogantly, as if to suggest that this is the final proof, either of the fact that there is no God at all, or else that if there is a God, He is clearly not a God of love. Their question is a statement rather than a query. As we

have already indicated on previous occasions, the real difficulty here is the fundamental one of belief in God at all. The whole attitude is wrong; and what is needed on our part and from our side is not so much a theodicy with respect to the particular question of war, as a statement which is likely to lead to repentance, and an 'acceptance of God's salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. There is no purpose whatever in arguing about a particular and subsidiary question with a person who is clearly not right on the central question. If a man does not believe in God it is idle to discuss with him one of God's actions. We only try to explain the ways of God to those who believe in Him and who are in a genuine and honest perplexity.

That brings us to the second type of person who asks this question. Here we have what may be called the pietistic type of Christian. This person is far removed from the one we have just been considering. It cannot be said of him that his belief in God is so slight and so slender that the merest suspicion of an ill wind can destroy and sever it. He has been orthodox, and has believed all that Christians should believe. More, he has enjoyed his religion and has found in it the main interest of his life. But the interest has been almost entirely personal-personal in the sense of an experience of personal salvation, personal also in the sense that the directly experimental and experiential results and effects of Christianity have been the main objects of consideration and of interest. This has been true even with respect to his study of the Bible. He has gone to it for food for his soul in a personal sense, and the type of commentary that has appealed to him most of all has been that which is classified as "devotional." Theology has not interested him. Indeed, he may have felt it to be a danger. Christianity as a "world view" is literally something that has never entered into his thinking at all. His tendency has been to shut himself off from the world, intellectually as well as in practice. And still more important, he has tended to dissociate God from any interest in the world save in the redeemed. And as long as there was peace all was well. But the outbreak of war forces upon this type of person the consideration of the larger problem; and for the first time he may have to ask himself whether his scheme of things can include this. Not having faced it before, such a person often finds himself in real difficulties, and especially when he discusses the question with the other type of person whom we have already considered. God in personal salvation in Christ he can understand — but God allowing war?

The third type that is perplexed by this matter, is the kind of person who has held certain vague and loose ideas about God and about the nature of God. They have singled out the love of God from all His other attributes, and they have stressed it at the expense of the others, and often to the entire exclusion of the others. Their ideas about the love of God, moreover, are sentimental and weak. This shows itself in normal times in the view they hold of the subject of forgiveness, their representation being that God as love forgives without any conditions whatsoever, as if His righteousness and holiness were nonexistent. The idea that God should under any circumstances punish is altogether foreign to their whole outlook. The one activity they recognize in God is His forgiveness, and His benevolent attitude towards mankind. Holding this view of God, and believing thus, that God's one idea is that men and women shall be happy at all costs, they cannot understand how God can possibly allow war with all its cruelty and its suffering. It seems to them to be incompatible with all that they have previously believed.

Now these last two positions deserve our sympathetic consideration. They are genuine and honest difficulties which actually give rise to pain as well as to intellectual perplexity. What have we to say to them? Obviously, in the space provided we cannot hope to deal with the matter in any exhaustive manner. We can simply lay down the general principles which are taught so clearly in the Bible, comparing scripture with scripture.

Incidentally, it is interesting to observe that this actual question of "Why does God allow war?" is not considered or raised as such in the Bible at all. The text we have chosen is the nearest approach to it; for it does raise the question of the origin of war, though it deals with the matter from the standpoint of ourselves rather than from the other angle, with which we are mainly concerned. Our business in this study, then, will be, not so much to expound this particular text, as to deal with the general teaching of the Bible on the subject. The most convenient division of the matter is to divide our answer into the negative and the positive.

The negative

By the negative answer we mean not that God does not allow war, as if to suggest that He is not able to do so, or that it is something which is altogether outside His control. We mean, that before we come to deal with the teaching of the Bible on the matter positively, it is important that we should examine the complaint that is made, and show how it is based upon certain false presuppositions. We shall deal with but two of these.

There can be no doubt at all that most of the trouble arises from the fact that so many, instead of taking the teaching of the Bible as it is, and, indeed, oftentimes not even taking the trouble to read the Bible at all, in order to discover its teaching, absorb certain ideas that are loudly proclaimed and freely taught. As we have already indicated, that is probably the reason why the question has been raised more frequently and more seriously in this century than in previous times.

Formerly, theology and the practical living of the Christian life were based directly on the Bible and its teaching. But latterly the approach has been more and more philosophical, and men, having drawn a false picture of God, are surprised and annoyed that facts seem to demonstrate that the drawing is not accurate! Men who read and who knew their Bible, and who lived by its teaching, were not worried and perplexed by the problem of war in its relation to God. They did not feel that it assailed the very roots and foundations of their faith. Why? Because they saw clearly that the Bible nowhere and never promises that there shall be no war, at any rate this side of the millennium. Indeed, they observed further that its teaching seemed to be the exact opposite.

They saw how our Lord Himself prophesied that right until the end of the age, and especially as the final consummation drew nearer and nearer there would be wars and rumors of wars. His words actually were (Matthew 24:6-7):

And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines and pestilences and earthquakes in divers places.

They remembered also the dark and mysterious prophecies of the Book of Revelation, all pointing in the same direction. They thought also of those words of St. Paul, where he said that evil men should wax worse and worse and that the mystery of iniquity which was already working would later be let loose and work without restraint.

The idea that the world, partly as the result of the preaching of the gospel and in accordance with the general plan and desire of God, would gradually evolve into a better and better place, is entirely false to the teaching of the Bible itself. Yet that has been the popular teaching for many years, teaching which has impregnated not only the minds of the majority outside the church, but, one feels at times, the majority of those within the Church also. We have been told over and over again that, as men grasped the purpose of God as offered and taught to them by the various educational and cultural agencies, the time would soon be at hand when wars would be no more and we should all live in a state of peace and plenty and universal happiness. Indeed, it has been argued that if man with his intelligence and enlightenment can come to see the folly and the horror of war, and do his all to prevent war, then God of necessity must hate it to an infinitely greater degree, and must obviously, therefore, restrain and prevent it. If we were making all this effort to produce a perfect world, free from war, God surely must be doing so to a still greater extent.

So the argument ran; and its acceptance has been very widespread. Some believed it actively; others, quite unconsciously and without really thinking about it at all, and without any testing, allowed themselves to believe it. The dogma was that God must be working with all His might to prevent war. It was part and parcel of the view held of God. The reply is, as we have seen, that it is a purely imaginary idea.

God has not promised us such a world.
He has actually taught us to expect the
very kind of world in which we are living today.
The words of our Lord were see that ye be not troubled.

Being forewarned, we were to be forearmed in the realm of our minds and spirits. If we take the Bible and its records as the supreme revelation of God, the fact of war should not trouble us in the sense that it will shake our faith in God. The Biblical "world view" is thoroughly pessimistic. Nothing is so important as that we should study the Bible itself and discover what God proposes to do for this world, and what God has promised to do for this world, instead of projecting our own hopes and desires and wishes into and on to God's plans, and then be surprised and disappointed and grieved when we discover that they are not being carried out. So our first reply to the question "Why does God allow war?" is to ask another question —

Has God ever promised to prevent or to prohibit war?

Our second answer may also be put in the form of a question:

Why do we expect God to prohibit war? or
Why should God prevent war?

Apart from the theoretical reason that God should prevent war because it is sinful, with which we shall deal in the next section, there can be no doubt that the real reason why people expect God to prevent war, is that they desire a state of peace, and feel that they have the right to live in a state of peace. But that immediately raises another question, which, in a sense, is the fundamental question with respect to this whole matter.

What right have we to peace?
Why do we desire peace?

How often, I wonder, have we faced this question? Has not the tendency been to take it for granted that we have a right to a state and condition of peace? Do we stop to ask what is the real value and purpose and function of peace?

This question, surely, should engage our attention. There are two passages, at least, in scripture which show very clearly why we should desire peace. The first is in Acts 9:31:

Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

That is a description of what happened in the churches after a terrible period of persecution and unrest. We should desire peace in order that what is described there may happen amongst us also.

The other passage is in 1 Timothy 2:1-2:

exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks, be made for all men, for kings, and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and a peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

There we have the same emphasis again. It is not enough that we should desire peace merely that we may avoid the horror and the suffering of war, and all the dislocations and hardships and interference with ordinary life that are consequent upon it. Our real desire for peace should be based upon the further desire to have the fullest opportunity to live the godly and the holy life, and to have the maximum amount of time in which to build ourselves up in the faith.

Man's chief business in life is to serve and to glorify God. That is why the gift of life has been given to him. That is why we are here on earth; all other things are subservient to this — all the gifts and the pleasures which God gives us so freely. That is the chief end and object of man's life; and consequently he should desire peace because it enables him to do that more freely and fully than he can during a state of war.

But is that our reason for desiring peace?
Is that the real motive in our prayers for peace?

It is not for me to judge, but one cannot be blind to facts. Far too often, I fear, the motive has been purely selfish — merely the avoidance of the consequences of war. Indeed, it has frequently failed to rise even to that level, and one has felt that many have desired peace merely in order to avoid a disturbance of the kind of life which they were living and enjoying so heartily. What kind of life was that? In a word, it was almost the exact opposite of that described in our two passages of scripture.

Under the blessing of peace, men and women, in constantly increasing numbers, have forsaken God and religion and have settled down to a life which is essentially materialistic and sinful. Ever since the First World War — thinking that this was indeed "the war to end war," with a false sense of security, buttressed also by insurance schemes and various other provisions to safeguard themselves against the possible dangers that still remained — men and women in this and in every other country have given themselves to a life of pleasure seeking, accompanied by spiritual and mental indolence.

This became evident not only in the decline in religion, but still more markedly in the appalling decline in morals; and indeed, finally, even in a decline in a political and social sense. It was a life of purely selfish and carnal enjoyment, with all the slackness in every respect that such a life always produces. It led to the decadence on which the rulers of Germany banked, and on which they based their calculations. They did not believe that we would not fight because we were highly spiritual, but, rather, because they felt that we had lost our stamina and would allow nothing to interfere with our indolent life. Then came a crisis in September, 1938.

Men and women crowded to places of worship and prayed for peace. Afterwards they assembled to thank God for peace.

But was it because they had decided to use peace for the one and only true purpose, namely, to live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty?

Was it in order that they might walk
in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost?

The facts speak for themselves. Thus I ask the questions:

Had we a right to peace?
Do we deserve peace?
Were we justified in asking God to preserve peace and to grant peace?

What if war has come because we were not fit for peace, because we did not deserve peace; because we by our disobedience and godlessness and sinfulness had so utterly abused the blessings of peace? Have we a right to expect God to preserve a state of peace merely to allow men and women to continue a life that is an insult to His Holy Name?

The positive

But that leads us to a consideration of what we have called the positive answer to this great question. That God allows war is a fact. Why does He allow it? What is the positive treatment of this question in the Bible? Here it is not so much a question of specific statements, as of applying certain fundamental principles, clearly taught, to this particular issue.

We must consider, first, what we may call the Biblical view of war. It is not that war as such is sin, but that war is a consequence of sin; or, if you prefer it, that war is one of the expressions of sin. Actually from the point of view of a theodicy that distinction really does not matter, as the argument still remains the same.

The Bible traces war back to its final and ultimate cause. It is true that it does not altogether ignore the various political and social and economic and psychological factors of which so much has been made. But according to its teaching, these things are no more than the immediate causes, the actual agencies employed. The thing itself is much deeper.

As James reminds us, the ultimate cause of war is lust and desire; this restlessness that is a part of us as the result of sin; this craving for that which is illicit and for that which we cannot obtain. It shows itself in many ways, both in personal, individual life, and also in the life of nations. It is the root cause of theft and robbery, jealousy and envy, pride and hate, infidelity and divorce. And in precisely the same way it leads to personal quarrels and strife, and also to wars between nations.

The Bible does not isolate war, as if it were something separate and unique and quite apart, as we tend to do in our thinking. It is but one of the manifestations of sin, one of the consequences of sin. On a larger scale, perhaps, and in a more terrible form for that reason, but still, in its essence, precisely the same as all the other effects and consequences of sin.

But someone may argue that there must be an essential difference because of the fact that loss of life is involved in war. The reply is, that while the Bible regards life as sacred, and prohibits us to take life merely to gratify a spirit of lust or of revenge, it at the same time teaches that, from God's side, the soul is of infinitely greater importance than the life of the body. God's concern is not that our lives should be perpetuated and prolonged here on earth for a certain number of additional years, but rather that we should come into the right relationship with Him, and live lives that will glorify His Holy Name. We attach such significance to time, and to length of years, that we tend to forget that what ultimately matters and counts is the quality of the life.

War, then, is a consequence and an effect of sin of precisely the same kind as all the other effects and consequences of sin. Sin always leads to suffering, misery and shame, whether in a quiet or in a spectacular manner. We tend to become concerned when the principle manifests itself in bulk or on a large scale. We ignore it or fail to see it in its real essence, which is what really matters. To ask God to prohibit war or to prevent war, therefore, is to ask Him to prohibit one of the particular consequences of sin. Or, if we take the view that war itself is actual sin, it is to ask God to prohibit one particular sin. Here again we see both the selfishness that is involved in the request and also the insult to God. Because this particular form of sin, or consequence of sin, is especially painful and difficult for us, we ask God to prohibit it. We are not at all concerned about the holiness of God, or sin as such. Were we so concerned, we would ask Him to prohibit all sin and to restrain all iniquity. We would ask Him to prohibit drunkenness, gambling, immorality and vice, the breaking of the Sabbath, and all the various other sins which men enjoy so thoroughly. But if anyone ventured to suggest that, a protest loud and strong would be registered immediately in the name of freedom. We boast of our free-will and resent any suggestion or teaching that God should in any way interfere with it. And yet, when, as the result of the exercise of that very freedom, we find ourselves faced with the horrors and troubles and sufferings of a war, like peevish children we cry out our protests and complain bitterly against God because He has not used His almighty power and forcibly prevented it! God, in His infinite and everlasting wisdom, has decided not to prohibit sin and not to restrain altogether the consequences of sin. War is not an isolated and separate spiritual and religious problem. It is just a part and an expression of the one great central problem of sin.

But the Biblical teaching advances beyond that point, and gives reasons which are still more positive in explanation of the fact that God allows war. We shall merely tabulate them.

It is clear that God permits war in order that men may bear the consequences of their sins as punishment. This is a fundamental law which expresses itself in such words as

whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap.

Punishment is not altogether postponed to the next world. Here, in this world, we bear some of the punishment for our sins. How clearly is this shown time and time again in the story of the Children of Israel! They disobeyed God and flouted His holy laws. For a while all was well. But then they began to suffer. God withdrew His protecting care from them, and they were at the mercy of their enemies, who attacked them and robbed them. Indeed, at the very beginning, and as the result of the first sin and transgression, we find that God ordained and decreed punishment. God said,

Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.

Every painful consequence of sin is a part of the punishment meted out for sin. But someone may raise the objection, and ask: "But why do the innocent suffer?" the answer cannot be given fully here, but in its essence it is twofold. First, there is no such person as the innocent, as we have seen already. We are all sinful. But furthermore, we clearly have to reap the consequences not only of our own personal sins, but also of the sins of the entire race; and, on a smaller scale, the sins of our particular country or group. We are, at one and the same time, individuals, and members of the state and of the entire race. The Gospel saves us as individuals; but that does not mean that we cease to be members of the state and part and parcel of the entire human race. We share the same sun and rain as other people, and we are exposed to the same illnesses and diseases. We are subject to the same trials by way of industrial depression and other causes of unhappiness, including war. Thus it comes to pass that the innocent may have to bear part of the punishment for sins for which they are not directly responsible.

Again, it seems clear that God permits war in order that men may see through it, more clearly than they have ever done before, what sin really is. In times of peace we tend to think lightly of sin, and to hold optimistic views of human nature. War reveals man and the possibilities within man's nature. The First World War shattered that optimistic view of man which had held sway for so many years, and revealed something of the essential sinfulness of human nature. A time of

crisis and of war is no time for superficial generalizations and for rosy, optimistic idealisms. It forces us to examine the very foundations of life. It makes us face the direct questions as to what it is in human nature that leads to such calamities. The explanation cannot be found in the actions of certain men only. It is something deep down in the heart of man, in the heart of all men. It is the selfishness, hatred, jealousy, envy, bitterness and malice that are in the human heart and which show themselves in the personal and social relationships of life, manifesting themselves on a national and international scale. In the personal sphere we tend to excuse them and to explain them away. But on the larger scale they become more evident. Man in his pride and his folly refuses to listen to the positive teaching of the Gospel about sin. He refuses to attend a place of worship, and refuses instruction from the Word of God. He rejects the gracious, loving offer of the Gospel. He believes that he knows himself, and thinks that he is capable of making a perfect world altogether without God. What he refuses to recognize and to learn by the preaching of the Gospel in a time of peace, God reveals to him by permitting war; and thereby shows him his true nature and the result of his sin. What man refuses and rejects when offered by the hand of love, he often takes when delivered to him through the medium of affliction.

And all this, in turn, leads to the final purpose, which is to lead us back to God. Like the Prodigal Son, when we have lost all and are suffering acutely and in a state of wretchedness and misery, seeing our folly and our stupidity, we think of God, even as he thought of his father and his home. No word is found more frequently in the Old Testament as a description of the Children of Israel than the words,

in their trouble and distresses they cried unto the Lord.

They were blind to the goodness and kindness of God; they turned a deaf ear to the appeals of His love and His grace; but in their agony they remembered Him, and turned to Him. And we are still the same.

It is only as we suffer and see our folly, and the utter bankruptcy and helplessness of men, that we shall turn to God and rely upon Him. Indeed, as I contemplate human nature and human life, what astonishes me is not that God allows and permits war, but the patience and the longsuffering of God.

He makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

He suffered the evil, perverse ways of the Children of Israel for centuries; and now for nearly two thousand years He has patiently borne with a world which in the main rejects and refuses His loving offer, even in the Person of His only-begotten Son.

The question that needs to be asked is not "Why does God allow war?" but rather,

Why does God not allow the world to destroy itself entirely in its iniquity and its sin? Why does He in His restraining grace set a limit to evil and to sin, and a bound beyond which they cannot pass?

Oh, the amazing patience of God with this sinful world! How wondrous is His love! He has sent the Son of His love to our world to die for us and to save us; and because men cannot and will not see this, He permits and allows such things as war to chastise and to punish us; to teach us, and to convict us of our sins; and, above all, to call us to repentance and acceptance of His gracious offer.

The vital question for us therefore is not to ask, "Why does God allow war?" The question for us is to make sure that we are learning the lesson, and repenting before God for the sin in our own hearts, and in the entire human race, which leads to such results.

May God grant us understanding and the true spirit of repentance, for His Name's sake.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), minister of Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years, was one of the foremost preachers of the twentieth century. He wrote many books, and edited much of his expository preaching for later publication. He has had an enormous influence on evangelical Christianity, and is largely credited for the resurgence of interest in reading the English Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, J.C. Ryle, and other post-reformation writings.

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