

Am I a good guy or a bad guy? Moses thinks I am a good guy. God thinks I am a good guy. But you, with your modern sensibilities, you may very well think I'm a bad guy: Intolerant of others' choices; willing to define what is evil; and, violent. Yeah, a very bad guy according to current norms.

If you think I'm a bad guy, you may very well think God is a bad guy, too. Intolerant, violent. Willing to define evil exactly. No getting around that if you read the Old Testament. And a New Testament writer says God doesn't change like shifting shadows, so the New Testament God of love is the same being as the Old Testament God.¹ So...what's up? How do you make sense of it all?

God HATES evil. That's where it starts. He hates evil. He does not dislike it, or disapprove of it a bit. He hates it with his entire being.

Why? Because God loves people, and evil destroys people, both physically and spiritually. Evil spreads itself, and preserves itself. In my time, evil is perpetuated through the worship of false gods, so God hates false gods, too.

My name is Phinehas, son of Eleazar. My grandfather is Aaron, the brother of Moses. I am a priest of the Most High God of the Hebrews. And I'm definitely one of God's good guys.

A little over four decades ago, Moses and Aaron led the Hebrew nation out of Egypt. Their destination was the land of Canaan, later known as Israel. God had promised the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham and Isaac, and he was making good on that promise.

After the Hebrews had been traveling for a few years, God ordered them to go and take over the land from the people who lived there. The Hebrews were afraid so they refused. Defiant and rebellious. The consequences? God sentenced them

¹ James 1:17

to wander in the wilderness for forty years. And then he used those forty years to purify the people. He wasn't just punishing them to be mean. The survivors learned to depend solely on God for every good thing. The rebellious people died during that time; the people who grew up with the gods of Egypt, died in the desert.

More importantly, during that forty years, the Hebrews had little contact with the outside world and were not enticed by foreign false gods. After forty years in the desert, the Hebrews are much better prepared to enter the Promised Land of Canaan, but they still have a long way to go. For one thing, all of our trained fighting men died in the desert. We are not prepared for conflict, or war.

We start traveling toward the eastern border of Canaan. When we cross the Arnon Gorge, we confront Sihon, the king of Heshbon. We offer to cross his land peacefully, but he chooses to confront us in battle. God leads us to complete victory over every town. We destroy every man, woman and child, but God allows us to keep the livestock.²

We turn toward Bashan, and confront the Og the King in the battle of Edrei.³ God gives us complete victory over every town, even the walled cities. We kill every man, woman, and child, but God allows us to keep the livestock.

We are on the verge of entering and conquering Canaan, BUT our understanding of what that means is based on what God told Moses on Mount Sinai.⁴ God will use his angel and other spiritual weapons to drive out the people ahead of us. He will turn the country over to us, and we will have plenty of food, water, and will be disease free. He will do it slowly so the land will stay good and the wild animals will not take over. All we have to do is obey God, and be very careful not to worship any of the Canaanite gods, make treaties with the Canaanites, or let any of them live among us. We expect to drive them out before us, like frightened herds of sheep. No fuss, no muss, no bloodshed.

Unfortunately, we haven't been perfect little angels ourselves since God told us how he would drive out the Canaanites. The golden calf incident showed we have

² Deuteronomy 2:24-36

³ Deuteronomy 3:1-11

⁴ Exodus 23:20-33

a propensity to worship false gods. Our grumbling and complaining has shown we don't fully trust God. And our rebellion against Moses and God resulted in our wandering in the desert for forty years.

Now, we Hebrews are entering the plain of Moab. This will be our last stop before entering Canaan. No enemy can stop us now. Well, one enemy can. "We have met the enemy, and the enemy is...us." Surely you have heard that before. We could have invented it.

While we are camped in Shittim, our men begin indulging in sexual immorality with the Moabite women living nearby. They invite our men to their sacrificial feasts to their false gods, and our men go. They eat the sacrificial meals, and bow down to the gods.

We find out later that the Moabite women were purposeful in doing this. They were taught by the prophet, Balaam, that this was the way to destroy the Israelites.⁵ The women weren't being harlots, they were being warriors.

The Lord's anger begins to burn! He allows a plague to start among the Israelites.

God instructs Moses to kill the leaders of this immoral behavior, and Moses instructs Israel's judges to do so. While Moses and the people are weeping over this situation, Zimri Son of Salu prances by with a Moabite woman and takes her into his tent.

I am furious! God's righteous anger burns in my heart. I grab a spear and barge into the man's tent, to find them already committing sin. I drive the spear with such force that it goes through him and into her!

I come out of the tent, shaking, the plague stops. Twenty-four thousand Israelites die in the plague. God instructs us to treat the Moabites as enemies from now on.

God looks favorably upon my action, and he rewards my family with an everlasting agreement to be priests. The Psalmist says that my action is credited to me as righteousness for endless generations to come.

⁵ Numbers 31:16

But you cannot really understand the importance of my story without knowing why God rewards me. God rewards me because I have as much zeal for God's honor as he does. I will do whatever it takes for him to be honored OR to keep him from being dishonored.

Zeal is an English word that has gone out of favor. It means that I have intense energy and enthusiasm as I pursue my cause. I am devoted. I am so passionate that I will take action.

I have so much zeal for God's honor that I will do whatever it takes for him to be honored OR to keep him from being dishonored. I hate evil like God does.

You might be thinking that my story is Old Testament stuff and doesn't really apply to your life. Before you go there, let's trace the word "zeal" a little bit through the Bible.

My story is the first use of the word in the Bible.⁶ In my story and in other passages, God is described as having zeal, zeal that accomplishes great things. The next mention is with Elijah the prophet who also had zeal for the Lord. Jehu had zeal for the Lord. David had zeal for the Lord. Many passages in the Old Testament describe zeal for the honor of the Lord.

John reveals that Jesus was zealous when he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple, and so fulfilled a prophecy. In fact, that prophecy implies that the zeal of Jesus would consume him.

On several occasions, the Apostle Paul described himself as having zeal. In fact, I believe it is Paul's level of zeal that allowed him to stay so dedicated to the cause of Jesus regardless of the level of suffering involved.

Paul wrote this command to the Christians living in Rome: "Never have too little zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor as you serve the Lord."⁷

I don't know how you will have to show your zeal for the Lord's honor. Stand up for the Lord when somebody says something dishonoring about him or uses his

⁶ At least in the New International Version and Authorized King James Versions

⁷ Romans 12:11

name in a dishonoring way. Prepare yourself ahead of time to tell somebody about the Good News of the Lord. Spend your money in such a way as to honor the Lord. Use your power as a citizen to honor him.

Back to the Plain of Moab after the plague stopped. It may have been my imagination, but it seems as if God gave a big sigh, and threw up his hands in frustration. Imagination or not, something big changed.

Remember when I said that four decades earlier, God intended to drive out the Canaanites ahead of us. No muss, no fuss, no bloodshed. And, I said that we Israelites had failed to completely obey God in several matters. I guess the affair with the Moabite women was the last straw.

We Israelites were soon to find that we were going to have to drive the Canaanites out by ourselves, and that there was going to be tremendous bloodshed as it happened. God didn't bother to explain it to me, of course, but I've always believed that God knew the Israelites needed to learn to hate evil and to hate worshipping other gods.

That lesson needs to be learned by all generations. Above all, hate evil and hate worshipping false gods. Paul echoes this in his writings, when he tells you to abhor evil and cling to what is good.⁸ In his famous chapter on love, Paul also says not to rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoice in the truth.⁹ The writer of Hebrews says that mature people train themselves to distinguish good from evil.¹⁰

So, God and Moses think I am a good guy. Turns out, Joshua and the people of Israel think I am a good guy, too. After we conquer the Promised Land, each tribe goes back to its lands. The tribes on the east side of the Jordan River build an unauthorized altar to God as a memorial to remind people. But, God did not instruct them to do this. The other tribes hear about it. They go ballistic. Maybe God will bring another plague on all of them?! They are scared out of their minds. They gather for war, but before attacking their brothers, they send a delegation to seek a peaceful solution.

⁸ Romans 12:9

⁹ 1 Cor. 13:6

¹⁰ Hebrews 5:14

Guess who leads the delegation. Because of the moral authority I gained from the incident on the plains of Moab, I am chosen to keep another plague from happening. Me! I hated evil, and everyone knew it. After each side's explanations, I judged that everything was ok. Both sides trusted my judgement and war was averted. Just one of the good guys.