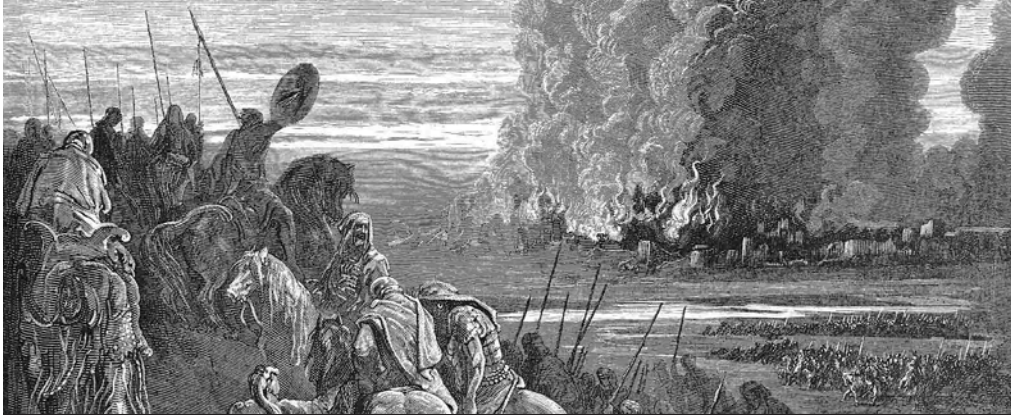


# The Biblical Call to Nonviolence and Peace



*Joshua Committing the Town of Ai to Flames* by Gustav Dore, c. 1890s. / Public Domain

## Understanding War in the Old Testament

1. **Understand texts in their context. The Hebrew Bible was written when life in the Ancient Near East was often harsh, primitive, and violent.** People thought everything that happened was of the gods and caused by supernatural wrath. The people of Israel largely thought and acted like this, as seen in their involvement in idolatry and war.
2. **Warfare is rooted in failing to trust God, who delivers by miracle, and relying instead on military might.** Stages of participation in war:
  - God fights for Israel; Israel is to “stand still” (Ex 14:13-14);
  - Israel fights with God; Israel is to be led by God’s prophets (Jo 8);
  - Israel fights for God; Israel has a king and military (1 Sam 8:8-20).
  - The second and third stages mark less trust in God and more trust in military force.
3. **The Old Testament criticizes warfare and prepares for the New Testament way of nonviolent love and pacifism.**
  - The Patriarchal period (Abraham & Sarah through Jacob & Rachel) was largely pacifist with little violence and with a vision that God’s people would bring blessing and salvation to all nations (Gn 12:1-2).
  - God’s deliverance at the Red Sea was foundational in calling Israel not to fight (Ex 14:13—15:21).
  - God intended to fight for, not with, Israel by means of miracle (Ex 14:13-31, 23:20-28; Dt 7:17-23; Jo 24:1-13; 2 Kg 6:8-23). Ideally, the plan to settle Canaan was for God to drive the people from the land or

dispossess them of it, not kill them.  
Expulsion, not annihilation.  
(But this practice of displacing people remains a disturbing issue.)

- God also fought against Israel because of her disobedience (Nm 14:39–45; Jo 7; 1 Sm 4; Dt 32; Jer 25:1–38).
  - From the beginning, kingship and military might were criticized as not relying on God as King and Deliverer and were granted as God’s concession to Israel’s demand (1 Sm 8:1–22, 10:17–27).
  - Prophets and psalmists called for trust in God, rather than power, for security and peace (Is 2:4, 31:1–9; Hos 1:7, 2:18; Mic 4:1–4; Zech 4:6, 9:9–10; Pss 20:6–8, 33:16–22, 44:6–8, 46:1–11, 147:10–11).
  - Prophets repudiated certain actions of violence done in God’s name (Hos 1:4–5; 2 Kg 10).
  - The Suffering Servant will achieve God’s will for Shalom (Is 40–55).
  - There are surprising new stories of loving the enemy (2 Kg 6:8–23).<sup>229</sup>
4. **War in the OT is an occasion to**
- Trust in God for deliverance (Ex 14:13–15:21).
  - Turn to God with repentance (Jer 25:1–38).
5. **Put violence in the Old Testament in perspective.**
- What’s terrible by our standards is less so by ancient practices.
  - Language of the ban (killing all) uses stereotypical language and was mostly carried out at military outposts against combatants.
  - Hyperbole, typical of ancient conquest language, is used with numbers. Canaanites who were “totally destroyed” actually still survived (Jg 1).
  - Accounts in the OT and archaeology confirm that widespread destruction of cities did not happen; rather, gradual
- infiltration did.
- Battles recorded as commanded by God were defensive in nature. Those that were offensive were not considered exemplary.
  - What is described is not necessarily prescribed (Jo 10:22–27). *Is* does not equal *ought*; what happens may not be supported.
  - The “textual God” may vary from the “actual God.”
  - All said, God in the OT is often difficult to understand (Is 55:8–9).
6. **The New Testament supersedes the Old Testament.**
- A new covenant would replace the old covenant (Jer 31; Ez 36).
  - Of the differing traditions in the OT, Jesus follows the prophetic tradition of trusting in God and not the kingly tradition of trusting in the military for our security.
  - Jesus is the fullest revelation of God (Heb 1:1–3), so all scripture must be interpreted in light of his life and teachings. He reveals that God is fundamentally loving (Lk 15:11–32; Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:8), nonviolent (Mt 26:51–52; Lk 9:51–56, 23:34), and kind to the wicked (Mt 5:43–45; Lk 6:35). He calls his followers to be and do likewise.
7. **In the redemptive movement in scripture, violence is increasingly revealed as being against God’s will:**
- From unlimited retaliation in the Ancient Near East.
  - To laws of limited retaliation in the OT (Ex 21:23–25; Lev 24:19–20).
  - To the way of nonviolence in Jesus (Mt 38–39).

## The Call to Nonviolence in the New Testament

1. **In the Old Testament (OT), warfare is rooted in failing to trust in God's deliverance and relying instead on military might.** The OT criticizes warfare and prepares for the New Testament way of nonviolent love and pacifism. Because Jesus is the complete revelation of God, all scripture must be interpreted in light of him as God's Way.

2. **New Testament teachings call for nonviolence:**

- Love even your enemy (Mt 5:44; Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8).
- Do not resort to violence (Mt 5:38f, 26:52-53; Lk 22:49-51; Jn 6:15).
- Overcome evil with good (Mt 5:39-41; Rom 12:14-21; 1 Pt 3:9).

3. **The nature of Jesus's messiahship is nonviolent:**

- Jesus proclaimed and modeled the peaceable way of the kingdom in a politically revolutionary context. Against the military expectations of the coming Messiah, Jesus modeled the way of the Suffering Servant and conquering Lamb, not the violent force of Zealots.
- Christ's way is not passive nonresistance but active nonviolence that intervenes, confronts, and engages (Jn 2:13-22, 18:19-24; Mt 23:1-36).

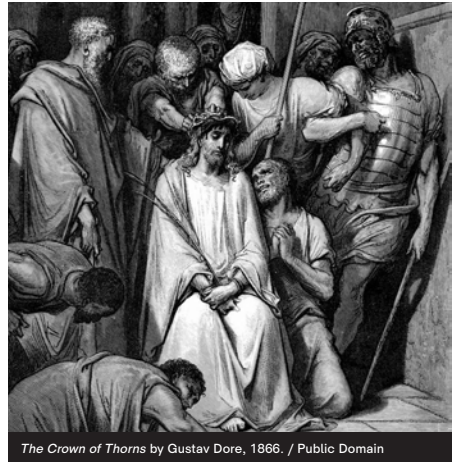
4. **Christ's life and death calls for nonviolent discipleship:**

- Discipleship requires following the way of Christ, where servanthood replaces aggression, forgiveness absorbs hostility, and suffering replaces violence (Mt 26:52-53; Phil 2:1-8; Eph 5:1-2; 1 Jn 3:16; Mk 8:34; 1 Pt 2:21-24). The call is to patient endurance (Rv).
- The cross is the ultimate example of suffering servanthood and reconciling

love for enemies (Rom 5:8-10; Eph 2:13-16). The resurrection shows that Christ's way will prevail over evil (Col 2:15).

5. **The Church's mission essentially involves peacemaking:**

- Since God's will is to restore shalom in the world, peace is at the heart of the gospel (Is 11:1-9; Ez 34:25-31; Zech 9:9f; Eph 2:14-17).
- The church is the body and instrument of Christ's peace (Eph 2:11-22, 3:10; Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11).
- Following the way of Christ, the church is charged with the mission of reconciliation in a broken world (Mt 5:9; Eph 1:9-12; 2 Cor 5:17-20).<sup>230</sup>



*The Crown of Thorns* by Gustav Dore, 1866. / Public Domain

## The Practice of God's People

1. **The practice of the early church demonstrates NT pacifism.** For the first three centuries of the church, Christians refused military service. No church leader before Constantine (AD 313) approved of Christian participation in warfare. Following the way of Christ, their witness was unequivocal: Christian love forbids retaliation and revenge and requires the renunciation of violence. They applied this to not only interpersonal but also sociopolitical arenas of life. Only after the fourth century AD, when Christians began to acquire power and prosperity, did this conviction change. Christians then modified Christ's call to fit their practice.
2. **While many churches supported war, Anabaptist Christians recovered Christ's call to renounce violence.** Menno Simons said, "The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife. They are the children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and know of no war. . . . Since we are to be conformed to the image of Christ, how can we then fight our enemies with the sword? . . . Spears and swords of iron we leave to those who, alas, consider human blood and swine's blood of well-nigh equal value."
3. **Today, many people recognize that the way of Christ is powerful and effective in our world where military might is increasingly ineffective to transform conflicts.** Nonviolent interventions demonstrate a better record than violent force in achieving peaceful change. This has been shown in the cases of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, the Philippine revolution, Solidarity in Poland, the collapse of the Iron Curtain, apartheid in South Africa, and others.<sup>231</sup> Far from passivity, the way of Christ calls for active nonviolent engagement in our broken world to bring about God's peace.



St. Peter the House of Cornelius by Gustav Dore, 1866. / Public Domain