PART I

The Problem and a Looking-Glass Solution
Week #1: The Elephant: Calling It Like It Is

The old adage about “the elephant in the room” refers to something massive and obvious to anyone paying attention that is totally ignored or denied for one reason or another. It can be as inconsequential as a lingering odor that can’t be identified or as meaningful as an important conversation topic everyone knows needs to be addressed but that everyone would much rather avoid. Sometimes the “elephant” is avoided because it seems too awkward and uncomfortable to address, but sometimes it’s avoided due to outright fear. It just seems too daunting to tackle.

As Greg points out in *Cross Vision*, the violent portraits of God in Scripture have created just such an “elephant,” and it’s one we must stop ignoring, avoiding, or dismissing if we’re ever going to figure out how such passages actually point us to the revelation of God in the crucified Christ, as we’ll later see all Scripture is supposed to do.
THE BIG IDEA: The violent portraits of God in the OT must be faced head on.

FINDING JESUS: “All Scripture is inspired by God for the purpose of pointing to him. We just need the ability to see it.” (CV 16)

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS: Major concepts from this lesson include:

- **ANE** = ancient Near East; this included nations like Assyria, Canaan, Israel, and many more. The ANE was the context in which all of the OT was written. The reality of this historical context must be faced head on if we are to properly understand the OT, including especially the OT’s violent depictions of God

- **hērem** = to set apart a people group for total destruction as an act of devotion to Yahweh

REFERENCES AND REFLECTIONS: Here is a summary of Greg’s main points from this chapter:

The Book Greg Couldn’t Write: “On the authority of Jesus, I had to affirm that the whole OT is divinely inspired. But also on the authority of Jesus, I could no longer accept the violence that some narratives within this divinely inspired book ascribe to God. . . . [It] was only by acknowledging that the violent portraits of God in the OT were not compatible with the God who is fully revealed on the cross that I came to see how these portraits actually point to the God who is fully revealed on the cross!” (CV 6–7)
Embracing the Problem: “If a biblical author ascribes an action to God that we would normally consider morally awful, [we must] admit that the action is, in fact, morally awful.” (CV 7)

God Engaging in Violence: “Origen taught that when we come upon a biblical passage that seems unworthy of God, we must humble ourselves before God and ask the Spirit to help us find a deeper meaning in the passage that is worthy of God. . . . Like many other Christian thinkers in the first several centuries of church history, Origen considered all the violent portraits of God in the OT to be unworthy of God. Yet these early Christian thinkers didn’t feel free to dismiss these portraits, for they firmly believed that all Scripture is inspired by God. These thinkers rather believed that something else was going on when Scripture represents God in ways that are inconsistent with what is revealed in Christ, and they patiently waited on the Holy Spirit and contemplated what this something else might be. As a result, they believed the Spirit helped them discover the Christ-centered, God-glorifying treasure that was buried in the depths of this unworthy material.” (CV 16)
As you consider Greg’s thoughts, please read and reflect on Numbers 31:1-18:

1. Make a list of the things God seems to command, or at least allow, the Israelites to do in this passage that strike you as incompatible with the revelation of God in the crucified Christ.

2. If you had read this passage in another religion’s sacred text, what words would you use to honestly express how the passage strikes you? How would you describe the portrait of God in this passage?
3. Do you think God actually endorsed Moses giving his men permission to keep captured virgins for their own personal/sexual pleasure, or that God actually commanded his people to kill all the male children and all the non-virgin women? If so, how do you reconcile your view with Jesus’s teaching that we are to love, pray for, do good to, and have mercy on all people, including our enemies (Luke 6:27, 35–36)? If not, how do we continue to affirm that this passage is divine inspired and to make sense of it?
Here are some additional study questions to help silently engage with Greg’s thoughts:

1. Have you ever honestly faced and wrestled with the dark, grisly nature of these violent portraits of God before now? If not, why not? If so, how were you able to come to terms with them?

2. Have you ever been able or willing to describe actions ascribed to God as “morally awful”? If not, why not?
Here are some questions to process as a group:

1. Have the violent portraits of God been an “elephant in the room” in your personal or church experience? Were they addressed at all? How so or why not?

2. Discuss why you agree or disagree with Greg that we need to be forthright in acknowledging that the OT contains portraits of God that are “ugly” and “awful”?
3. How have these kinds of violent portraits of God in the OT impacted your reading of Scripture, your mental conception of God, and/or your relationship with God? More specifically, have the OT’s violent depictions of God hindered your ability to fully trust that God is as beautiful as Jesus reveals him to be?

4. What do you think, and how do you feel, about Origen’s counsel on passages that are “unworthy of God”? How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with acknowledging that violent portraits of God are “unworthy of God?”
5. What remaining questions and/or objections do you have concerning the material covered in this chapter?
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: Here are some questions Greg has received on this material followed by his responses:

Q1: Isn’t it presumptuous to judge any action taken by an all-good God to be “morally awful”? Couldn’t something be morally awful for humans to do but good for God to do?

A1: Unless God’s goodness is analogous to what we mean by the word “good,” we have no idea what we mean when we call God “good.” Our profession of faith in God’s “goodness” is thus devoid of meaning. Even more importantly, Jesus fully reveals the goodness of God, and it involves loving enemies and refraining from engaging in violence against them, not annihilating them.

Q2: How can you confess all Scripture to be “God-breathed” and yet not feel obliged to accept what every passage of Scripture plainly says, however offensive it may be?

A2: I accept what every passage of Scripture plainly says, but what God intended a verse to say to an ancient audience may be different from what God intends a verse to say to those of us who know his true character in the crucified Christ. This is why New Testament (NT) authors often found a Christ-centered meaning in passages that the original audience couldn’t have dreamed of. As we’ll demonstrate in later chapters, when we read passages containing violent portraits of God through the lens of the cross, we can discern a meaning that the original audience couldn’t have discerned, and this meaning discloses how these violent divine portraits point to the revelation of God in the crucified Christ.
RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: Greg recommends the following material that discusses various issues and perspectives on material covered in this chapter:


