

Did God condone aggression?/ Are deceased aware of those on earth?

Q. I am 91 years old and recently, after reading the Gospels, I began to read the Old Testament — which I think was a mistake! Please explain why God ordered Moses and Joshua to be so aggressive that they killed thousands of people and plundered their cities. (Conyers, Georgia)

A. You have identified an issue that is clearly problematic and has been the source of discussion among theologians for centuries. One example of the passages to which you refer comes in the sixth chapter of the Book of Joshua, where God is said to have authorized Joshua to march around the walls of Jericho until they had fallen, then to enter the city with the Israelite army and to slay its inhabitants.

Some might argue that the Canaanite culture was inherently immoral — given to brutality, bestiality, incest and even human sacrifice — and that it therefore deserved God's wrath. But the passage certainly does not seem to square with our Christian notions of peace and nonviolence.

Pope Benedict XVI addressed the topic in his 2010 apostolic exhortation "Verbum Domini"; in a section titled "The 'Dark' Passages of the Bible," he explained that "God's plan is manifested progressively and it is accomplished slowly, in successive stages and despite human resistance" — which is another way of saying that the fullness of truth is revealed only in the person, teaching and ministry of Jesus (No. 42).

I would draw an analogy to the passage in the Gospel of Matthew (19:1-12) where Jesus is asked why Moses allowed divorce; Christ's response was that it was because of the "hardness of your hearts." God was working, over time, with an imperfect people, gradually leading them to Christ.

Q. As a longtime practicing Catholic, I would like to know whether the church has a position on whether those who are now in heaven can observe, and are aware of, how we are living our lives here on earth. Also, can we pray to our deceased loved

ones for help and guidance in the same way that we pray to the saints? (San Francisco)

A. As to your first question, the belief of the church is that the saints in heaven are, in fact, aware of us and of how we are living. From the earliest days of the church, Christians have prayed to the saints and asked them to petition the Lord on our behalf.

In the Book of Revelation (5:8), traditionally attributed to the apostle John, those in heaven are portrayed as interceding for us before the throne of God, holding bowls filled with incense and offering our own prayers to the Father. If they are aware of our prayers, they clearly must know what we are about.

Your second question is a bit more complicated. As for praying to deceased loved ones, we may not be certain whether they have yet merited heaven. If they are still in purgatory, we can surely pray for them — but can they pray for us? And here, theologians have differed.

St. Thomas Aquinas believed that the souls in purgatory were not yet in a position to intervene on our behalf. St. Robert Bellarmine, on the other hand, felt that these souls were already secure in their eventual salvation and therefore were in a favorable position to beg divine help for those of us still in earth.

If the deceased loved ones to whom we pray are already in heaven, then of course they can bring our prayers to the Lord.

So, to your question, I think that it does make sense to hope that they are already with God and to pray to them for help and guidance. I myself do this frequently — visit the graves of my parents and my sister and ask them to help me to live the way they taught me and to be a good priest.

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