

REDEEMING VIOLENT VERSES

A Guide for Using Troublesome Texts in Church and Ministry

By Eric A. Seibert

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING VIOLENT VERSES TO CHILDREN

Chapter 4 of *Redeeming Violent Verses* explores various ways Sunday school teachers, children's pastors, youth leaders, and others can thoughtfully teach violent Bible stories to children and teens, taking into account what is appropriate at various ages. To make the ideas in that chapter more accessible, this quick reference guide provides a brief overview of key suggestions offered there. With this resource at hand, those who teach children will be reminded of good options at their disposal for dealing creatively and constructively with some of the more troubling parts of the Bible.

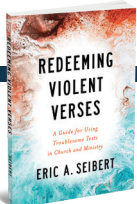
How to Teach Violent Bible Stories to Children

1. Introduce violent stories in age-appropriate ways.

AGE GROUP 1: With toddlers and early learners (ages 2–8), avoid some stories (e.g., genocide, suicide, mutilation, and child sacrifice), and selectively tell others by emphasizing parts of the story that affirm God's care and protection, rather than those that describe human death and destruction.

AGE GROUP 2: Introduce preteens (ages 9–12) to a wider range of stories and the violence they contain. For example, mention that lots of people died outside the ark and that many lives were lost inside the city of Jericho, but do not dwell extensively on the violent dimensions of these stories.

AGE GROUP 3: When teaching teens (ages 13–18), problematize the violence in biblical stories and encourage compassion toward the victims, being sensitive to issues in these texts that might be triggering (e.g., accounts of suicide or sexual violence).



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2. Be honest about violence in the Bible.

Talk about the violence in these texts (while making certain allowances for toddlers and early learners, as noted previously) and then help children and teens process whatever thoughts and feelings these violent verses elicit. This builds trust and helps children know you are not afraid to deal with difficult topics.

3. Refuse to regard violent individuals as heroes.

Do not praise biblical characters for shedding blood and killing. Rather, encourage children to praise people for saving lives and finding alternatives to violence (e.g., Shiphrah and Puah in Exod. 1:15-21, and Abigail in 1 Sam. 25).

4. Emphasize that our views about violence differ from those who lived in ancient Israel.

Help children understand that some of our most central Christian values differ from those we find embedded in Scripture. Certain types of violence that are condoned in the Bible, such as capital punishment, blood vengeance, and indiscriminate killing, are now widely condemned. We are not obligated to regard violence as virtuous just because it finds approval in the pages of Scripture.

5. Encourage questions and curiosity.

Make church a safe space where children and young adults know they are allowed to ask whatever questions they have about the Bible. Consider using Elizabeth Caldwell's "wondering model" of teaching the Bible, which encourages exploration and discovery and helps children actively engage biblical stories in ways that do not predetermine the outcome or keep new insights from emerging (see pp. 57–58 for specific instructions about using this model).

6. Help children imagine nonviolent versions of violent stories.

Invite children and teens to use their imagination to envision a violence-free version of the story. Ask them to imagine how things might have turned out differently if the main characters in the story had not resorted to violence. This creative approach is especially useful with Old Testament stories that approve of the violence they contain.

7. Be judicious about the songs, crafts, and dramas you use.

Be certain that the songs children sing in association with biblical texts, and the crafts they make, do not celebrate death and destruction or glorify violence.



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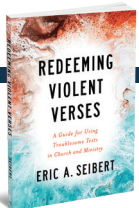
Answering Hard Questions

Children Ask about God's Behavior

1. Let them know it is OK to ask these kinds of questions by responding graciously and respectfully.
2. Encourage children to read the text slowly and carefully to see if that helps provide any answers to their questions.
3. Tell children that Christians have different opinions about how to understand God's violent behavior in the Old Testament and then introduce some of these (see pp. 62–63 for examples).
4. Challenge the theological accuracy of violent portrayals of God by questioning two assumptions about the Old Testament: (1) that all the stories are historically accurate, and (2) that God said and did whatever the text claims (see ch. 8 for more about this).
5. Be honest about your own questions and struggles with difficult passages like these.
6. If you don't know how to respond to a question, tell the child or teen who is asking that you will look into it and get back to them. Do some research or talk to others and follow up.
7. Invite a trusted pastor, Bible professor, or religiously educated layperson to come and speak on the topic in an age-appropriate way.

Some Final Words of Advice

1. Familiarize yourself with violent Old Testament stories, particularly the ones you anticipate teaching.
2. Try to anticipate some of the questions children and teens might ask about these stories.
3. Ask yourself what your students are likely to take away from the passage, and consider how to talk about it in ways that will encourage accurate views of God and appropriate Christian behavior.
4. Always keep in mind the two greatest commandments: love for God and others. Ask yourself this simple question: Will the way I teach this class increase my students' love for God and others? If so, you are surely on the right track.



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