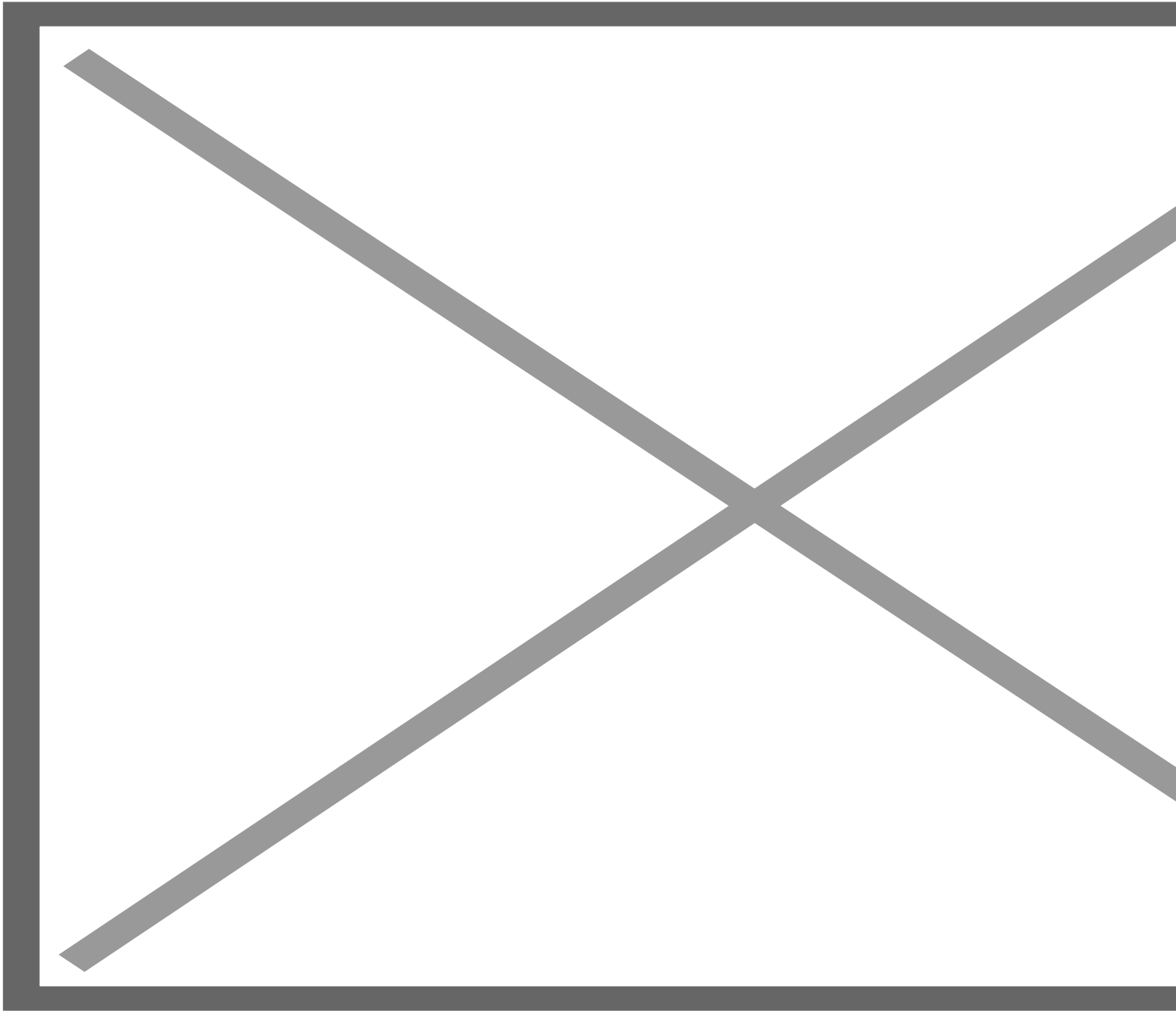


Franklin Graham preaches a God of hate

In his holiday sermon at the Pentagon, Graham cited scripture as a justification for war. But what if Samuel got God wrong?

by [Brandon Ambrosino](#)

January 5, 2026



Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

I'm always happy when a preacher finds a fresh way to discuss a familiar Bible story. Unless that preacher is Franklin Graham, the familiar Bible story is the good news of Jesus' birth, and the fresh take is that God is a god of hate and requires us to kill our enemies.

Graham delivered this sermon last month at a Christmas worship service hosted at the Pentagon by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and his wife Jennifer. The service began with music from Christian artists Matthew West and Anne Wilson before Graham opened his Bible to 1 Samuel to encourage the faithful with Christmas reflections about God's vengeance and fury.

"We think about God as a God of love," said the son of the late Billy Graham. "But did you know that God also hates? Do you know that God also is a god of war?"

Graham's holiday sermon was built on two passages from the Hebrew Bible, Exodus 17 and 1 Samuel 15. The first passage has become a well-known Sunday School story: Israel will triumph over their enemies on the battlefield as long as Moses keeps his hands up in the air. After a while, Moses' hands grow tired, but with a little help from Aaron and Hur, Moses keeps up his hands and his people prevail. Afterwards, God commands Moses to write about the victory, and promises he'll one day "utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under Heaven."

The second passage, 1 Samuel 15, shows God making good on that promise, Graham said. The story starts with the prophet Samuel commanding a newly anointed King Saul to destroy the Amalekites—including children, infants, and animals. Well, for whatever reason, Saul doesn't totally obey and lets Agag, the king of the Amalekites, live. He also decides to spare the best of the animals. As we might expect, God reveals to Samuel that King Saul didn't follow his instructions, so Samuel confronts him, strips him of his royalty, and kills Agag himself. God finally gets his way.

Graham told his audience that while these stories might sound harsh, they depict God as he really is. "*That's not the God I believe in.* Well, you'd better believe in him."

Why?

I'm not even sure God believes in that God. Nor am I sure that Samuel knows this God as well as he thinks. For instance, during his scolding of Saul, Samuel says that God neither lies nor regrets. But the chapter concludes by telling readers that God "regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel." So, it seems that Samuel has gotten God wrong. And if he's wrong about God's ability to regret, what else is he wrong about?

In Samuel's defense, we all get things wrong about God. That's why God comes to us—we can't figure him out, trapped as we are inside our human condition. If we are to know God at all, then God must take the initiative and reveal himself. But God's revelation has to be received, which means it has to be interpreted, which means that, like Samuel, we, God's interpreters, might talk about God inaccurately at times.

This doesn't mean we should stop talking about God. And it certainly doesn't mean we should ignore those passages in our sacred texts that seem a little too comfortable with war and violence, especially against women, children, and animals. But it does mean that we need to cultivate ethical reading practices so that when we come to these problem passages, we're prepared to read them in ways that honor the God they discuss. We go about ethics in reading the same way we go about ethics in daily living: by keeping an eye out for what we might have otherwise overlooked. Ethics is (usually) not about finding the right answer quickly but complicating or thickening a story for much longer than we initially thought we could. To read the Samuel story ethically is to bring into the discussion the fact that Samuel gets God wrong, and the Bible wants us to know it.

We should also remember that the scriptures are a compendium of different writings, and often the best way to read them is to read them intertextually, that is, alongside one another. The compilers of scripture seem to want us to read this way, given that they smash together surprising texts that, although the connections are not initially apparent, nevertheless prove fruitful as we try to construct meaning.

I think this happens in 1 Exodus 17, which opens with a story of thirsty, wandering Israelites. “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt,” they ask Moses, “to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” Concerned that his people are going to stone him, Moses asks God to provide them with water, and God miraculously supplies it from a rock. Moses then names the place *Massah*, which means “tempt,” because Israel tempted God by asking, “Is the Lord with us or not?” Usually, we take this to mean that God is angry because God’s people overlooked God’s presence. But might God also get angry when God’s people assume that God is on their side even when God isn’t? Might God be furious at us when we talk about our enemies as if God isn’t with them?

Is the Lord with us or not? This is quite possibly the best question we can ask ourselves when we study scripture and do theology. And it doesn’t surprise me that it occurs right before the Amalekite story is recounted. In fact, a close reading of that story doesn’t actually name God’s presence: Israel wins because of what Moses and Aaron and Hur do. Where is God? Is God with them or not? What about in later texts when Samuel tells Saul to kill infants and animals? Is God with Samuel as he gives that advice? Is God with Saul when he follows orders? What about when Saul takes mercy on some of those God was supposed to slaughter? Is the God of mercy with him in that moment? What about the slaughtered toddlers? Is God with them in their demise, receiving them into God’s eternal rest?

And what about us as we read these texts, as we preach these texts, as we *amen* these texts in the attempt to rally our political allies and frighten our political enemies? Is the Lord with us as we speak about the Lord or not?

The Christmas story answers that question for us: God is irrevocably united with the world, with all of us. But whether this will feel like good news depends on whether we want peace or war. Samuel wanted destruction. When he confronted Saul about not killing every Amalekite, he asked, “What is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?”

But those of us with ears to hear the Christ child know the answer: those are the noises of the animals gathered round the manger to worship the arrival of the Prince of Peace. He has not come to declare war on God’s enemies but to call them to friendship. He has not come to settle ancient scores but to forgive debts. Unlike other kings, he is not concerned with maintaining power or using force against those who oppose him. He does not seem afraid of those who have it out for him, nor does he resent those who do not share his hopes. He simply lives his life completely open to God and the world God loves.

Our Christmas challenge is to tune out the noises of a bustling, power-hungry empire and listen quietly for the baby who will one day grow up and tell us to put down our swords.