

## A War-Torn Creation

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*This article was originally a sermon in a mini-series on spiritual warfare. It represents a minority segment of evangelicals who at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are thinking both in terms of satanic influence on the earth and the responsibility of believers to do what they can to restore creation to its intended state, as an aspect of carrying out God's mission in this world.*

We are talking about spiritual warfare and that warfare permeates the entire creation. We are not talking about human warfare or violence. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12 that our struggle as kingdom people is not against flesh and blood, but it is against principalities and powers and rulers and authorities in dark places. If it has flesh and blood, as kingdom people we are commanded to love that person. In fact one of the main ways we do spiritual warfare is by living lives of outrageous, ridiculous love, which is the opposite of violence. So when I use warfare language, it is not about earthly, fleshly violence. Rather, we are talking about spiritual warfare.

Often when people think of spiritual warfare, they immediately think about casting demons out of people. That is one aspect of spiritual warfare, and it is biblical. But that is not the only or even the primary focus of spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is a holistic concept. Warfare isn't something that just goes on once in a while. It permeates our lives. It permeates the entire creation. Seeing the world as caught in warfare even at the level of creation, reframes the world in ways that have a practical impact on how we live our lives in kingdom mission.

A passage in Luke serves as a springboard to seeing this world as a war-torn creation. 'One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" We notice here that there are huge winds, the boat is taking in water, and Jesus is still asleep. The disciples are panicking but Jesus is sleeping in peace. '[Jesus] got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him"' (Luke 8:22-25, NIV).

The central problem that I am addressing is this question: If God is all good, all love, and if God created the world, why doesn't the world reflect God's goodness and love? Why is the world such a violent world? Now we can answer that question on a human level, because God gave us free will, we can either love or not love. That one is not that difficult I don't think.

But my question is why doesn't *creation* unambiguously reflect the loving, good character of God? The world we live in is a violent world even at the level of creation. It is a world where we sometimes experience killer earthquakes. Every year it seems, there are earthquakes that kill thousands upon thousands of people. Several years ago, an earthquake in Pakistan killed over a 100,000 people in 7 minutes. Where is the goodness of God revealed in that? And there are hurricanes and tsunamis that wipe out entire cities. Indonesia got hit with a tsunami that left thousands and thousands of people dead, and 10 times that many without homes. Where is the goodness of God revealed in that?

And there are famines and droughts throughout the world, leaving people without adequate food or water, killing hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. Then of course we have a spectrum of viruses and diseases that we have to fight against: AIDs, Ebola, leprosy, malaria. There have been times in history where large segments of the population were wiped out by the plague. In the Middle Ages, 30-40% of the world's population was killed by the plague. How could an all-good all-loving God create a world that has all of these diseases?

And then there are the parasites. One scientist said that parasites are actually humanity's worst enemy. They get in and eat their victim, human or animal, from the inside out. They have a sort of demonic intelligence. They know how to get in there and do the most amount of damage and cause the most amount of misery. One is called the hookworm. I think Satan left his signature on this one. Hookworm infection is a major disease in many countries of the developing world, according to the *International Journal of Epidemiology* (26:6). It latches on to the wall of the intestine and has just the right amount of chemicals in its mouth to keep the blood from clotting. It starves its host of its nutrition. So the infected person, no matter how much they can eat, and in third world countries they often can't get enough to eat anyway, is malnourished, anaemic, and underdeveloped. Then the hookworm replicates itself. When a group from our church went to visit a children's home in Haiti, one of the children they met was a 6-year-old girl, and when they put their hands on her stomach, they could feel the worms moving around inside her. Where is the goodness of God revealed in that?

Then you have the animal kingdom that is full of carnage. Hyenas attack an antelope, and chunk by chunk, eat it alive. Where is the goodness of God in that? We could recount the various horrors in history, the carnage and waste of life throughout our history. Where is the benevolent God in this?

But what concerns me is that you find that many Christians seem to grant the premise of the objection by many atheists, namely, the premise that if there is a God, he is the one doing all of this. Most Christians seem to believe that nature is right now just the way it is supposed to be; it was created this way. Human beings are a little messed up, they seem to think, but creation is working just fine. But those who hold that view have to say God is behind the parasites and the violence and the tsunamis. And then we cannot be surprised if people say, 'well if that's the kind of God he is, I'd rather have nothing to do with your God'. Where is the goodness of God reflected in the violence and the carnage that is nature?

I want to give an alternative perspective. It is the perspective that was the dominant view for the first three centuries of church history, up until Augustine. In this view, creation is permeated with spiritual warfare. It is not just human beings who are targets of spiritual warfare, but creation itself has been corrupted, so that creation does not any longer reflect unambiguously the goodness and the glory of God. This is the view C. S. Lewis espoused, as quoted by N.T. Wright in his blog: 'every square inch of space and every split second of time is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan'.<sup>i</sup>

Warfare permeates the entire creation. In Luke 8 Jesus rebuked a storm. The word, 'rebuke', is the same Greek word that is always used when Jesus rebuked demons.<sup>ii</sup> Nature is permeated by corrupting influences; there is something demonic at work in nature. It doesn't mean that there is a specific demonic power behind every hurricane, tsunami, every parasite and disease. But I am suggesting that nature as we find it now is not identical to nature as God created it to be. It does not reflect the glory of God.

Five biblical facts support this position that creation in its present state is not as God intended it to be.

### **1. God's Ideal Creation Is a Non-violent Creation**

In Genesis 1 God says over and over again, 'it is good', 'it is good', 'it is good'. And part of that goodness is the fact that there was no violence in creation. God said, 'I give you every seed bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food' (Genesis 1:29, 30 NIV). God did not say he gave the animals to each other for food. He gave them all the green plants for food. However else that you interpret this chapter, it tells me that it was a non-carnivorous creation. In fact, the Bible tells us that when the kingdom is on earth as it is in heaven, the earth will be rid of violence completely. 'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lay down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together' (Isaiah 11:6). Humanity will be reinstated as the rightful rulers of the animal kingdom. When the kingdom is restored, even a little child will be ruler over them (Isaiah 11:6). 'The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain' (Isaiah 11:7-9). That 'mountain' is referring to Mount Zion, which is the Old Testament's metaphor for the Kingdom of God.<sup>iii</sup> 'For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:9). The earth will be reconciled to God, animals will be reconciled to animals and peace will reign on earth. The world will then reflect unambiguously the glory of its creator.

## **2. Nature Is Cursed**

In Genesis 3 we read about a curse, a curse that came to the level of nature. When Adam and Eve rebelled and a curse came upon the world, hostility between serpents and people came about. Pain in childbirth came about at this time and the ground became much harder to work. Thorns and thistles began to grow, and all people will die because of the curse. All of these things seem like they are natural effects. We have difficulty imagining a world without thorns and thistles. However one interprets this passage, it is at least saying that nature is cursed, not operating how it was originally created to operate. 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time' (Romans 8:22). These are simply effects of the second law of thermodynamics. We cannot really imagine a world without the second law of thermodynamics. We see much in nature that does reflect God's glory, but we also see a lot that does not.

It is clear in Genesis 3 that God brought the curse on the earth. And yet Jesus rebuked the storm as though it was of a demonic origin. So the question is this: Who brings the curse? Is it Satan or God?

To answer this question, we need to go on to a third biblical fact.

## **3. Satan Holds the Power of Death**

'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil' (Hebrews 2:14). First John 3:8 says that Jesus came into this world to do warfare with the devil, to defeat the devil, and to destroy his works. And one of the works he came to defeat was death. So in Hebrews 2:14 death is a result of Satan's power, and in Genesis 3 death is the result of the curse. Reflecting on these passages together leads to the conclusion that the curse was simply a matter of God removing his protection over human beings and creation so that the evil powers are then free to do what they want to do, namely cause destruction and death.

Throughout the Old Testament God was trying to teach Israel the importance of walking with him, saying if they would walk with him, he would protect you from the aggressive nations. But if they did not walk with him, he would lift his hands and let the other nations have their way. The Old Testament writers referred to this as God judging Israel. But God was actually just letting other wicked nations do what they wanted to do. In fact, in Isaiah chapter 10, God punishes Israel by lifting his hand of protection from them, allowing Assyria to come in and defeat Israel. Then God judges Assyria for doing that very thing. Apply this to the garden of Eden and what you get is this, God says to Adam and Eve, guard the garden, walk with me and I will protect you. But if you don't walk with me, you will open up the floodgates and warfare in the heavenly realm will come down to your territory. Humans were meant to be co-rulers with God over this territory, but when the first humans rebelled, like a vacuum, the warfare of the heavenly realms was sucked in and humanity surrendered its God-given dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28) to the rebels in the heavenly realms.

## **4. Disease Has Demonic Origins**

Acts 10:38 says that Jesus 'went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him'. Apparently everyone he healed was under the power of the devil because of their sickness or infirmity. In the Gospels Jesus always regarded illness, sickness and disease as either the direct or indirect result of satanic oppression. He always treated illness and suffering as a result of this world being in an oppressed state. Never once does Jesus come upon somebody with an affliction and say well, this is the mysterious will of God. Or, this is just the natural law of cause and effect, and unfortunately it happens to go bad for you. Rather than passively accepting these conditions, he gets mad because creation was never supposed to be this way. A scientist could explain these afflictions by natural laws, but that should tell us that the natural laws operating right now are not operating exactly the way God intended them to. So now 'natural laws' can produce things like leukemia and cancer—not that there is a specific demon behind every occurrence of disease, but there is a corruption in nature.

## 5. All Creation Is Corrupted and Needs Saving

Colossians 1:19, 20 says 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross'. All things on heaven, all things on earth. Not only humans are estranged from God—all things need to be reconciled. It is not just humans that are prone to violence it is all things. Every square inch of this cosmos has been permeated with this warfare, which is why nothing operates exactly the way it is supposed to operate. This world is corrupted and messed up. We are physically messed up, some of us are mentally messed up, and we are all to some extent spiritually messed up because we are born in this polluted incubator. Living a godly life does not come natural for any of us. We have a propensity and inclination that works against us. We can still see the glory and image of God in people sometimes. But it is off a bit, it has been corrupted.

What the Holy Spirit is doing in our life is readjusting it and the same thing is true of all creation. We see the glory of God and the beauty of God in creation. But we also see much that does not look like it was intended to look. God never intended a creation in which there are 330 million people who don't have access to clean water. That wasn't part of God's perfect design. He never intended a creation in which 30,000 people die each day of starvation or of diseases related to starvation. He never intended a creation where 20 million people have died of AIDs and another 25 million who are infected right now. He never intended a creation in which 100,000 people are killed in a 7 second interval. He never intended a creation with tsunamis and hurricanes that wipe out entire cities. Nor did God intend for babies to die at birth, or for mothers to die giving birth.

The good news is that it won't always be like this. Paul says in Romans 8 that creation's groaning isn't just groaning in pain. It is also groaning in hope, because it is giving birth to something new, and the thing it is giving birth to is called the kingdom of God. We are right now in an in-between epoch. We are deciding how we are going to be birthed into eternity. For the purpose of this probationary epoch we have free will. As a result humans can and do inflict evil on each other. But when this age comes to an end, the promise of God is that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The principalities will be destroyed and the earth will look like God wants it to look. And in that world there will not be any tsunamis or parasites, the wolf shall lay down with the lamb and the bear with the cow. When Jesus rebuked the storm, he gave a foretaste of what is going to come—an eschatological sign. A time is coming when all kinds of wrong things in this world are going to be rebuked and the creation will reflect the beauty and love of its Creator.

### What Does This Mean to Us?

#### *1. Don't Look for the Hand of God in Natural Disasters*

Yes, we can find a few places in the Bible where God used natural disasters to teach Israel lessons. But no legitimate biblical hermeneutic would lead us to think we can extrapolate from those incidents to explain all earthquakes and natural disasters. The arguments presented here are evidence against that. In Luke 13:4 Jesus referred to the natural disaster of a tower falling on a group of people. Jesus asked his audience if they thought for a moment that those who were killed were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem? Jesus' point was that those in his audience were all sinners and what they should worry about is their relationship with God.

We should not attempt to read the will of God or the hand of God in catastrophes in nature. Because when we start doing that, we start discerning the character of God in those disasters, and then we start attributing to God that which should be attributed to Satan. There are a lot of people who will say, if that's what God is like I don't think I can believe in that kind of God.

If you want to know what God looks like, don't look at the hookworm, don't look at the parasites, don't look at the earthquakes. Look at Jesus dying on Calvary for the very people that crucified him. That's what God looks like.

#### *2. Live with a Warfare Mindset*

There is a world of difference between living life on vacation and living life like you are in a war. When you are on vacation, you pamper yourself, you want as little inconvenience as possible for yourself. And

we all need that once in a while. But when you are in a battle, the important thing is to do what your commanding officer tells you to do. People either live like they are on vacation or they live like they are in a war. Perhaps only one out in a thousand people live like they are in a war. In America, we call it the American dream to pamper ourselves, get as many toys as we can, get as big a house and car as we can. If the world was a wonderful place I would be all for it. But the world is not a wonderful place. We are in a battle. Maybe 999 people out of a thousand don't know it, but God's people are supposed to know it. And that knowledge needs to affect how we live, how we spend our money and how we use our talents. The question is not 'can I afford it', the question is 'what does God want'? A warfare mindset is not a vacation mindset.

### 3. *Fight the Evil Effects of Nature*

We are doing spiritual warfare when we fight disease. This is more than just prayer. Anything we do to push back the harmful effects of nature is a step toward reclaiming nature, toward rebuking the curse. Funding famine relief is spiritual warfare. Supporting organizations that bring relief to those who are suffering from a drought is doing spiritual warfare. Teaching people better farming and irrigation skills can be spiritual warfare. When scientists do scientific engineering to develop improved crops they are doing spiritual warfare. When they investigate new ways to sanitize water, they are doing spiritual warfare. When they discover ways to fight diseases and discover their origins, that is spiritual warfare. Anything we do to fight poverty and hunger is spiritual warfare. Having mercy on animals is a form of spiritual warfare. Anything we do to reflect God's ideal for creation is a form of spiritual warfare. By these and other means we are fighting back against the curse of death that is not God's will. In fact, every positive thing we do for the earth, including recycling, is a form of spiritual warfare. Many evangelical Christians may see this as a 'liberal' agenda, but care for creation was our first command: 'Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Genesis 1:28). Fighting back against the evil effects on this war-torn creation is a means of obeying this original command and demonstrating God's will on earth as his representative.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/interviews/wright.asp>

<sup>ii</sup> Paul R. McReynolds, *Word Study Greek-English New Testament with Complete Concordance*, Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1999, 1223-24.

<sup>iii</sup> See G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds), 'Kabod', *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume 7, 35 [Accessed online 27 December 2010, [http://books.google.com/books?id=weqiE1yiPyoC&pg=PA35&lpg=PA35&dq=Zion+Old+Testament+metaphor+for+the+Kingdom+of+God&source=bl&ots=d95yYT2WCx&sig=Syb\\_1YXYsDhhH6DEyyr-UuefMXc&hl=en&ei=D3QZTdm9OI66sQPR2M2\\_Ag&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CDkQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=weqiE1yiPyoC&pg=PA35&lpg=PA35&dq=Zion+Old+Testament+metaphor+for+the+Kingdom+of+God&source=bl&ots=d95yYT2WCx&sig=Syb_1YXYsDhhH6DEyyr-UuefMXc&hl=en&ei=D3QZTdm9OI66sQPR2M2_Ag&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CDkQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q&f=false)]