

## Warfare

There was a film back in the 1960's starring Paul Newman called "Hombre." It was very popular back then, although I don't think Hollywood would produce a Western-type movie with that unique plot today. Newman played a white man who his whole life had been raised by Apache Indians. His white, American stagecoach co-passengers unknowingly spoke contemptuously of Indians, and one of the passengers even was carrying a huge load of cash he'd stolen from the Indians. Robbers stopped the stagecoach and took a woman passenger hostage in order to get that money. There was of course a stand-off with a gunfight, and the character Newman played, the hated Indian-man, sacrificed his life to rescue the woman. He killed all the robbers, and he saw to it that the money would be returned to the Indians. The story was biblical in that it involved a despised, self-sacrificing hero, a righteous act, a rescue, and a violent defeat of evil. These are the very elements that make up the over-arching meta-narrative of the Bible.

At the end of Genesis Chapter 3, the first couple is banished from the Garden and from God's presence. Many commentators correctly point out that the rest of the Bible is the story of God seeking to restore His beloved humans to Himself. But that misses the point. The key issue we all miss is that those beloved unique creatures that God made specially to be in relationship to Him and to serve Him were stolen from Him. An evil agent, the Serpent, usurped God's privileged role and took His servants captive. So the rest of the Bible really is God on the warpath to take back what is His property and to vanquish that wicked Serpent. The entire creation was at stake.

Don't suppose for a moment that God was annoyed at this disturbance in the Garden and will simply woo His humans back to Himself by a display of kindness and love. No way! The Serpent provoked Him, and God is furious. His wrath was kindled, and He's going now to war. The Bible's great meta-narrative is divine warfare. The climactic battle that ends the war is described in the Book of Revelation at the very end of the Bible.

But there's a problem: God cannot simply use His infinitely great power to overcome the Serpent, because that strategy would be using Satan's own wicked methodology. So proud Satan would win. Satan's entire hope of winning this cosmic conflict is to get God to use His power to overcome him. Satan knows only the use of power to get what he wants, and lies, deceptions, murders, etc are expressions of his use of power. God cannot simply overpower Satan or sovereignly decree Satan into oblivion – although God has the right and the power to do that. Justice demands that God use some different strategy than simply being more powerful.

God's strategy is subtle, missed by almost everyone because we're so imbued with and thrilled by ideas of power. God's strategy is this: weakness. Thru weakness and suffering, thru what appears to be defeat and humiliation, God wins. And the church is involved – we are involved – so let's think about biblical warfare.

God is filled with wrath at the entrance of evil into His "very good" creation. He had to curse the beautiful creation He made to limit the extent of evil, to frustrate Satan and his captive humans in how much wickedness they could do. The Flood of Genesis 6-8 demonstrates how irate God was at the spread of evil. That Flood – both Scripture's record of it as well as the testimony to it everywhere in the rocks – warn all people everywhere throughout history that a future more severe judgment awaits them.

The call of Abram then began God's program of warfare by weakness: the subtlety of experiencing deliverance from the iron grip of Satan and ultimate victory by believing God's Word. Abraham's body was "dead," as was Sarah's body. Yet they had the son that was promised to them, a figure of resurrection, of life from the dead. Abraham's enduring confidence in God's promise paid off, despite what everyone knows by experience, that old people cannot have children, in the form of resurrection.

The Exodus from Egypt was a great battle that God won, but not by the use of power. Pharaoh, an agent of Satan, had total control over God's people and had no intention of ever releasing them to serve their God. The Israelites might have disappeared from history right there in Egypt if not delivered. It therefore was necessary for God to inflict Egypt with violence, thus the death of every first-born in the land. But the Israelites were spared by their obedience to and faith in God's promise that the blood of a lamb on their doorposts would protect them from the judgment of a furious God. Believing God's Word resulted in that great rescue. Satan was warned: God has every intention of defeating him and delivering His captured people.

At the Conquest documented in the Book of Joshua, the text says that more Canaanites were killed by God throwing hailstones from heaven than by the Israelite army (10:11). God even temporarily held up the circuits of the sun and moon so that the Israelite army could gain the victory. Why? Because God was furious at that wicked people who were occupying His holy land. And because the Israelite army believed God's word that they would succeed in taking the land despite the overwhelmingly greater strength of the Canaanite trespassers. God was fighting for Israel against the agents of Satan (10:14b).

The most explicit expression of God's war against the Serpent in the entire Old Testament is in 1 Samuel 4-6. In antiquity, when one nation went to war and conquered another, the conquering army would deface or demolish the idols and statues of the gods of the conquered people. Typically, as archaeologists have discovered, the conquerors would chop off the head and often also the hands of the statues of the gods of the defeated nation to show how powerful they were and how weak the gods of the defeated nation were. They also did it to humiliate the conquered people. In 1 Samuel 4, the Israelites foolishly took the ark of God to the battle front where they were fighting the Philistines. The ark represented the presence of God. Like idolatrous pagans, the Israelites

supposed they could manipulate their God into giving them a victory. They had (misplaced) confidence in a representation of God rather than in God's Word. What happened next is astonishing. God deliberately allowed His ark to be captured by the enemy! It was as if – who would believe it? – God was weak and humiliated by defeat. The Philistines, supposing they had triumphed over Israel's God, took the captured ark back to their temple to display as a war trophy (Chapter 5). But the next day, the Philistines' own god, Dagon, was found in total submission, prostrate on the floor before the ark. The Philistines returned the statue to its upright position. But the next day they found it again prostrate on the floor, this time with its head and hands broken off. They surely got the message by now! The God of Israel was more powerful than their own god, and they were rightly scared.

It really was Dagon, the Philistines' god, who was humiliated and defeated. The God of Israel would have the victory over Satan's agents, indeed, over Satan himself. How? By what appears to be weakness and humility, by what is, apparently, being overcome by Satan. The very same scenario would be reprised at Calvary. In astonishing weakness and humility, the Son of God – Israel's promised Messiah and King – was taken captive by the Jewish leaders and by Rome, Satan's agents, and was put to death, the ultimate Satanic capture. Jesus did not use the power He possessed as deity to defend Himself. He trusted in God and in God's Word. He depended entirely on God to vindicate Him. And so . . . by God's power, He rose from the dead! In total victory! Satan could not hold Him. The resurrection of Messiah Jesus showed that His righteous life, His loving obedience to and trust in God and His willingness to suffer pain and loss for the sake of others whom God loves gained complete victory over Satan. Thus we read, “. . . **so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death**” (Hebrews 2:14-15). And, **“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work”** (1 John 3:8). At Calvary, the ancient oracle was fulfilled: **“he [Christ] will crush your [Satan's] head, and you [Satan] will strike his [Christ's] heel”** (Genesis 3:15). At Calvary, God won the war. It only remains for the war to fully play out and be concluded. And that's on-going.

In Romans and in Ephesians, Paul discusses this warfare with respect to the Church. In the early chapters of Romans there is extensive discussion of sin. At the middle of Romans, Chapter 7, Paul personalizes sin: it's embodied [in the person of Satan, although Paul doesn't make that explicit]. Then at the very end, at 16:20, Paul nails it, **“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”** The origin and source of sin is Satan. The fulfillment of Genesis 3:15 is yet future; the war is on-going. But look at what Paul wrote: “under *your* feet.” The Church's feet! Don't miss this. Because of our identity with Christ, our union with Christ, our being the Body of Christ, we're to continue waging God's war until the final defeat of Satan. That won't occur until the future Day of the Lord discussed in Revelation, when Christ will return and **“tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty”** (Rev 19:15).

In Ephesians, Paul explicitly commands us to be warriors in God's war. We've been delivered from Satan's grip by believing in Christ, by our confidence in God's Word. We're now to live the resurrected life of Christ. And we're to join God in His on-going war against Satan (Ephesians 6:10ff). We're to take God's side in this war – not the side of Satan. Satan is still fighting, but we mustn't allow ourselves to fall victim. How do we engage the enemy? The same way Christ did, thru weakness and suffering. We imitate Christ. That's the message of 2 Corinthians.

“Weakness” for Paul means willing to suffer loss. Loss of money, loss of freedom, loss of personal peace, loss of bodily well-being, loss of reputation, or loss of life. Paul writes clearly on this in 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 11:21-33; and 12:9-10. The context for these verses is actively carrying out ministry as God's agents on earth, continuing the work Christ came to do of offering the Kingdom, regardless how much loss we suffer for doing it.

At Philippi (in Acts 16), the loss Paul suffered was his freedom. Instead of undertaking a power move to avoid prison, he was willing to go to prison. And as a result, God not only worked a miracle in freeing him, but the jailor and his family got saved. Paul also was “weak” in appealing to Caesar, because he was taking a very real and serious risk of suffering loss of life by doing that. And that indeed happened. In the early church, believers didn't fight off the Roman soldiers arresting them; they submitted and went to their death. As a result, innumerable people in the Empire saw their faith, their fearlessness in the face of death, and got saved and the early church grew exponentially. That's God's strength made perfect in weakness.

Missionaries 200 years ago went to Africa to share the Gospel with the heathen there, knowing that they might (would) get malaria and die. But they trusted that God would raise up a church there as a result of their sacrifice. And He did. Those Christians back home in England who said, “I'm not going to risk getting malaria and die,” knew nothing of “weakness.” “Weakness” means being fully engaged in ministry but willing to take risks and suffering loss if necessary. “Weakness” means submitting to hostile or adverse circumstances according to God's will for us. And if we die, we know from God's Word that a blessed future waits on the other side. And who knows what God might do as a result of our death. This is how we engage in God's kind of warfare.

A great and terrible war is going on, a war of cosmic dimensions. And God is *el gibbor*, the mighty warrior (Exodus 15:3, Psalm 24:8; Isaiah 9:6 and 42:13, and Jeremiah 32:19, for a few examples). Although we're involved, **“the battle is not yours but God's”** (2 Chronicles 20:15). We participate with God using His unique strategy of defeating an exceedingly powerful foe by the radical means of trusting God. He's dangerous, for sure. But He's good, and He's trustworthy, and He loves us. The victory is His, and ours too if we're faithful. Be faithful.