

Holy War

In this lesson, I argue that the Bible, beginning to end, is all about warfare. Life itself is all about war. We don't like that thought, but it's true. If anyone today should realize that that's our situation, it's we evangelicals. But I suspect that we prefer to live in an unreal world of our own making, so this lesson is needed. (I anticipate, with sadness, that readers who prefer compromises and a passive, uninvolved, safe religion won't want, or benefit from, this lesson.)

The Philistines captured the ark of the Lord, and were they ever sorry they did that. They regretted it grievously. The story is narrated in 1 Samuel 5. The Philistines placed the captured ark into the temple of their god, Dagon, alongside a statue of their own god. The ark was there as tribute, spoils of war, to their supposedly greater god. The next morning, however, the statue of their god was prostrate on the floor before the ark. The Philistines uncomprehendingly set the statue upright again, only to find it the next day again on the floor, this time with its head and limbs cut off. The Philistines were now struck with terror. They understood that holy war was being waged against them. That first night, Israel's God miraculously forced their god, Dagon, into a position of worship before Him. But then, the statue being erect and alongside the ark again, God attacked the statue mortally. Israel's God is not only stronger than Dagon but, if Dagon, and his subjects, the Philistines, don't worship Him, God will destroy them in deserved wrath. Everywhere in their land that the Philistines subsequently took the ark, death of Philistines resulted. Israel's God, the God of Scripture, was carrying out holy war against the Philistines and their god. The Philistines unsurprisingly ceased to exist as a discrete people-group several centuries later. They disappeared completely from history.

The Exodus from Egypt occurred only because God's holy war against Pharaoh and his Egyptian subjects was totally successful. The Ten plagues, followed by the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, was all God's doing. Each episode in the protracted confrontation of Moses with Pharaoh was a power encounter that God won. Pharaoh learned (too late) that Israel's God rules heaven and earth, and He is exceedingly dangerous to any who dare to oppose Him.

The Conquest of the Land narrated in the Book of Joshua was also holy war. The Canaanites had no right to that Land and, worse, they polluted it with their debaucheries and idolatries. So God commanded Israel to take the Land from them, necessitating warfare. It was holy war. And the climactic moment in that war is narrated in Joshua 10. God Himself became a warrior and hurled huge hailstones down from heaven upon the Canaanites, so that God killed more than the entire Israelite army did with their swords. God even caused the sun to stop in the sky to allow more time for a complete defeat of those enemies of His. The Book of Judges also has stories of holy war. So do the books of Kings and Chronicles. The annihilation of the Assyrian army threatening Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32:20-23) was holy war.

David's victory over Goliath is a timeless and unforgettable story (1 Samuel 17). The text clearly interprets that episode as a power encounter. God entered into holy war against those who made themselves His enemies by using the faith of a shepherd boy, a lad who cared deeply about the honor of His God. The episode of Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) was another vivid power encounter. In that narrative, God was engaged in holy war not only against Baal and those who led that idolatrous religion, but against His own people who had apostasized by worshipping Baal. Success in battle occurred because of the great faith of Elijah.

Another power encounter occurred in the Book of Job. Satan dared to challenge God, and God defeated Satan at that time by means of the faith of a believer in God who had to suffer. This, probably the very first Scripture, anticipated the great meta-narrative of all Scripture. A similarly subtle power encounter involving faith occurred twice in the Book of Daniel. Daniel's three friends chose to remain faithful to their God, the God of Scripture, the God of Israel, rather than submit to worshipping an alien god. God vindicated them, and God had the victory. The same occurred with Daniel himself; he resolved to be faithful to God despite what God's enemies would do to him, and God obtained that victory too. In both these instances [let's be sure to get it!], it was the faith of these individuals that resulted in God being revealed in time and history as sovereign, and that the gods of the nations are impotent before Him.

All the Bible is essentially about a cosmic conflict between God and evil, taking place on the battlefield of this physical creation, for God is carrying out holy warfare against those who oppose Him, against those who oppose His goodness. David understood this: **"Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle . . . "** (Psalm 24:8). The war came to a decisive climax when the Son entered creation. Isaiah had prophesied that He would come as a warrior (*el gibbor*, "the mighty God," in 9:6; also in Isaiah 42:13, **"The Lord will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior [lit., "a man of war"] he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies"**). God's holiness, justice and wisdom – indeed, His honor – necessitate such a conflict. His very character is implacably against evil. So evil must be revealed for what it is and disposed of. So we inhabit a world of good and evil.

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4) was a power encounter. The many exorcisms narrated in the Gospels were also power encounters. The meaning of these is that the Son came to fulfill God's holy war, a warfare against not only Satan, but against all evil. God is doing something of infinite significance: Defeat of all sin, rebellion and disobedience. Defeat of all that dishonors God. Defeat of Satan's horribly wicked kingdom that attempts to replace God's own kingdom of righteousness, peace and peace. Defeat also of the Serpent's theft of God's glory from human creatures (Romans 3:23 should be understood as saying, "For all have sinned and fail to express the glory of God."). The Son came to defeat not only sin but the cause and the consequences of sin. The cross was a necessary encounter in this war, as were the resurrection and ascension. The great, ultimate battle, however, will be when Jesus returns to earth to reign. (See Revelation 16:14; 17:14; and 19:14.) But until then . . . What?

Christ in heaven is still engaged in holy war, and the Church is the Body of Christ on earth. Believers are united to Christ to be His agents, God's servants, in carrying out or continuing the warfare. The so-called "Church Age" is really the age of God's great holy war against darkness, against sin, against Satan's world-wide kingdom. The Great Commission is, in reality, Jesus' declaration of war against Satan because of his wicked grip on humanity, God's beloved creatures.

Paul was uniquely instrumental in founding the Church, which is how we normally view his work. But we miss this necessary concept: Paul was engaged in God's holy warfare all thru his extensive ministry. And when he [over half a dozen times] insists that we imitate him, he's declaring us to be warriors too. As Christ's servants, we engage in warfare by sharing the Gospel, by bearing testimony about Jesus and what He accomplished and will further do for us, as well as by suffering loss as necessary. We are soldiers, all of us, if we're following Jesus. By our witness, we're to enable the Spirit to snatch Satan's human creatures from out of his iron grip, and to prepare them also to continue the warfare.

Satan's hosts include wicked gods and myriads of demons. Although invisible, those supernatural beings surround us, oppose us, oppose God, and influence us with their deceit. Satan's strategies include all the bogus religions of the world (Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, for example), ideologies (such as humanism and Marxism), and entire systems of ungodly values and beliefs. Satan's wicked ploys include inducing us to ignore our calling and live as those in his grip live, while allowing us to passively attend church because he knows that doesn't and can't harm him or his purposes.

We suppose that "faith" is believing something, agreeing that it's true. It's not so simple. Faith is what the Bible reveals it to be, and the Bible *illustrates* faith. It describes faith, it doesn't define it. It illustrates it, for example, in the episodes of David, and Daniel and his three Jewish friends. And the faith of Joshua and Caleb, and Rahab and Gideon, and Elijah, and . . . lots of others. And especially the life of Paul. Faith in Scripture is in the context of doing battle, trusting in God for the victory. Yes, our faith in Jesus is in His victory over death, sin, and Satan, and because of that great victory to take us to the Father for peace and joy and love. But we need to take sides in this great conflict, and we do that NOT by sitting on the sidelines but by engaging the enemy as Jesus did, taking great risks regardless of the consequences, confident that we're on the winning side and in the future will be rewarded. Our obediently serving God in His holy war reveals which side we're on. Whether out of love, gratitude, fear, or humble piety (or all of these), if saved, we have to do it!

But we suppose also that the Church's warriors can be the professionals of the Church and those others who care to volunteer, in the same way that America's armed forces consist entirely of professional volunteers. That is not the biblical model. That American arrangement was cynically to protect politicians from being responsible for sending unwilling people into armed conflicts. God's arrangement, His will, is for every follower of Jesus to be involved in the conflict. There are no spectators in the Body of Christ. The warfare is evangelism. And it's why we're here!

I conclude now with this: Do we get the big picture? Since the Reformation, we suppose that Christianity is all about redemption. That is, it's saving God's sinful human creatures from Himself, from His own wrath, so that they can be in heaven when they die. But that's only one component of God's great purpose in creating. Let's understand that by creating, God has initiated something far bigger, a project to demonstrate in real life the loveliness and perfections of the Son, and to defeat Satan and all evil. Why? So that only His goodness will remain, forever. But God's goodness must be revealed in a world of time and space, God's glory has to be on full and glorious display, not remain hidden in the character of the invisible God. And so the Son has a major role to fulfill in this great cosmic work. The Bible reveals the outworking of all these initiatives. [Amos 3:7]. And just as the Son had to enter this physical world and actually display God's righteousness, love, and the obedience that is necessary to be on the side of good, so must we do the same. For us, it means being an active participant in God's *missio dei*, it means commitment and work and real risk. It may require suffering loss and/or great personal sacrifice. But hey, the gospel is Jesus! He came so we can know Him, love Him, trust Him, serve Him, and be like Him. That way, we exalt the Son, we take God's side in this war, we glorify God as good, and we join in Jesus' defeat of Satan. We *cannot* merely mentally agree to all of this; we must actually do it for it to be real.